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A BROTHERHOOD RISES

ASSASSIN'S CREED ORIGINS



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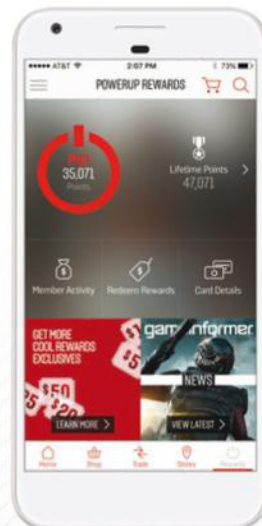
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The Return Of Assassin's Creed



ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com

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Early in the life of the series, I looked forward to Assassin's Creed games with a level of anticipation that few franchises could match. The original game, its sequel, and the amazing Brotherhood all hold special places in my personal video game hall of fame. At the time, I couldn't see how anything could possibly go wrong, but I think it all started to fall apart for me with Assassin's Creed III. I enjoyed it, but I could feel the execution starting to erode.

I knew for certain it was flying off the tracks with Black Flag, but even though the story had officially gone off the deep end for me, I fell in love with the pirate-focused gameplay. However, the story of Desmond and a larger mystery around the Templars and Assassins was what had pulled me into the series. That rivalry gave the great gameplay meaning, and Black Flag stated clearly that the series was headed in other directions.

From there things just got worse. I was unable to finish both Unity and Syndicate. Some people thought Syndicate was a step in the right direction, but I didn't agree. I don't think I was alone; other gamers seemed to drift from the series as well. Was it the lack of execution? The change in story direction? I guess we will never know, but despite all this, I feel the universe of Assassin's Creed has so many possibilities that it can weather the storm. The core premise that lets the games jump through place and time is a powerful one. But without innovation and the time and care to make the games as great as their promise, it is easy to see why those two entries didn't live up to my expectations.

I was happy that Ubisoft finally learned its lesson and took the series off the yearly release cycle to right the ship. Even though the series lost some of its luster over the years, it can still turn the tide and go from a sinking ship to a redemption story. We all love a great comeback.

The pressure is on. If Assassin's Creed Origins fails to engage, I feel the future of the franchise will be in peril, but things look to be on the right track. Check out our cover story and let us know what you think. I know I'm looking forward to it.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,



36 Assassin's Creed Origins

After taking a year off, Assassin's Creed is back with some big changes. The next entry, Assassin's Creed Origins, predates all the others, taking us to ancient Egypt to uncover how the brotherhood came to be. The game has a bigger focus on RPG elements, plus the ability to control your own eagle. We chatted with the developers and went hands-on to learn more about new assassin Bayek's journey, which takes place during Cleopatra's ascent to the throne. **by Jeff Cork**



14 **25 Fun Video Game Facts You Probably Didn't Know**
Learn how Lara Croft was almost Lara Cruz, which video game can claim to be the first in space, and what the heck the Nintendo Comboy is, among other rapid-fire facts.



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Rockstar Games is no stranger to delays, and Red Dead Redemption 2 is no exception.

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Video game development is undeniably a team effort, but this month we look specifically at two-person development teams and how they make games without driving each other crazy.



60 **Darksiders III**
At one time its future was uncertain, but we're happy to see the Zelda-inspired series will continue.



64 **Far Cry 5**
Ubisoft's open-world shooter series always manages to surprise. Is that true of the new entry?



50 **Destiny 2**
We've spent time with Destiny 2 and are letting you know what to expect from Bungie's follow up.



74 **Ever Oasis**
This action/RPG from the studio behind the 3DS Zelda remakes is one worth keeping an eye on.



79 **Injustice 2**
NetherRealm delivers a worthy follow-up to its 2013 DC fighter.



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This emotional adventure surprised us with its well-crafted, somber journey.



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It turns out navigating horror environments without the aid of sight can be terrifying.

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A number of readers were hot for Hellblade this month, while others wrote in with killer game ideas, business strategies, and a request for friendship advice. What? We give good advice!

Hello, Hellblade!

Thank you for your coverage of Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice (issue 289). Heavenly Sword wasn't my favorite PS3 game, but I enjoyed it and was intrigued at what a "spiritual successor" might be like. The more I learned of Ninja Theory's goal to bring triple-A quality to an indie game, the more interested I became. Too often when I see a new indie game, I'm repulsed by its crappy graphics and "retro" style. I've also been burned at the other end of the spectrum by games that look gorgeous, but are less mechanically or thematically interesting than popping bubble wrap. In this era of gaming, why can't we have both? What really elevated Hellblade to a must-buy, however, was when I learned of the depths of Ninja Theory's research and commitment to the meaningful portrayal of psychosis. I'm happy to see Ninja Theory following in the footsteps of possibly the most successful independent filmmaker, George Lucas, by showing us that ingenuity and drive can deliver high-quality production on a small budget.

Quentin Hudspeth
via email

Comparing someone to George Lucas is a bit of a dubious compliment nowadays, but we get what you mean – Ninja Theory is certainly trying to forge new ground in both Hellblade's story and production. Here's hoping Hellblade turns out to be Ninja Theory's *Empire Strikes Back*, and not its *Phantom Menace*. For more on Hellblade, head to gameinformer.com/hellblade.

A Modest Proposal

I've followed video games for the better part of 30 years, so I consider myself pretty knowledgeable in regards to the industry. I understand why companies have first- and third-party exclusives, but there's one thing I don't get. Seeing as how gamers are always complaining about Xbox's first-party lineup, why doesn't Microsoft just use its deep, billion-dollar wallets to buy certain franchises? I would think

the news of MS purchasing Red Dead Redemption 2 in its entirety would get gamers' attention and possibly sell millions of Xbox Ones. I realize the up-front price would be enormous, but wouldn't the eventual payoff be worth it? It's not like MS doesn't have access to that kind of money.

Tim Johnson
Holyoke, Colorado

While buying a franchise from Rockstar would almost certainly be out of the question, Microsoft did try this tactic when it forked over \$2.5 billion for Minecraft. However, MS didn't stop selling the block-building sim on other platforms, and based on its recent Play Anywhere initiative, the company simply seems disinterested in strict console-exclusive properties. As such, we doubt we'll see another billion-dollar buyout – even if Microsoft can afford it.

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!





Personal Foul

My friends and I were recently discussing video games, when I brought up the topic of sports games. I made the point that sports games fans are different because we get excited over little things like updated rosters, more realistic gameplay, and more extensive career modes. One of my friend's responses shocked me. He told me I wasn't a gamer, and that sports video games aren't considered real games. He said a real game is Warframe or some other game. I have since cut all ties to this friend for his attitude (he also said sports are stupid and that I shouldn't like them) and for other reasons I will not add. Thoughts?

Thomas Michael
via email

We're confused...do gamers outrank jocks in high school nowadays? Either way, we've heard people complain that video games aren't a real sport, but never that sports games aren't real video games. Still, we wouldn't recommend ending a friendship over one stupid opinion, no matter how phenomenally stupid it is. Now *two* stupid opinions, on the other hand...

You Win Or You Die

I can't believe no one has jumped on the opportunity to develop an open-world RPG set in the Game of Thrones universe. I know the Telltale series is out there, but you are still more or less beholden to the storyline set down by George R.R. Martin and the TV show. My friends and I are always talking about how awesome it would be to create a character and complete quests in Westeros with the main objective of making your House as influential as possible. Given the seemingly ever-growing fan base surrounding the books and TV show, this seems like it would be an instant classic/no-brainer/slam dunk. Do you think we will ever see something like this down the line? Maybe after the show has ended?

A.J. Litchfield
via email

A half-dozen Game of Thrones video games have surfaced over the years, including a browser-based MMO that's currently in development. Unfortunately, none of them deliver the open-world, choice-driven mix of action and political strategy that GoT fans want to see. We can always hope that someone will do the series justice in the future, but at this point we'd just be content getting our hands on the final two books.



Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Is Sakura coming to Street Fighter 5?"

Not during season two.

"How did Bubsy in Claws Encounters of the Furred Kind not make your worst subtitle list?"

Because the list wasn't Top 10 AWESOMEST subtitles?

"Any new info on hockey-mask Jason from the Friday the 13th game?"

Yeah – he's standing right behind you!

Worst Opening Line To A Feedback Letter:

"You're review was almost correct."

Question Of The Month:

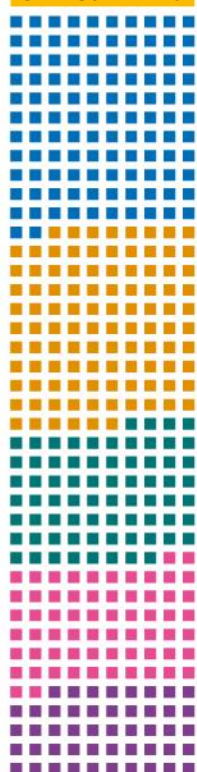
What do you want to see in the new Assassin's Creed game?

gi spy



(Left) Ubisoft Montreal's Jean Guesdon and Raphael Lacoste gave us the full rundown on the latest chapter in the Assassin's Creed saga. (Right) This month we said farewell to another team of inspired interns: Manon Hume, Jordan Leendertsen, and Zak Wojnar. Thanks for all the hard work!

On Your Mind



- Hellblade Hoopla
- More Couch Co-op!
- Nintendo's Noteworthy Ideas
- Review Complaints
- Darth Clark Fans (Scary!)



Steal This Idea!

In issue 289, we asked readers what characteristic Sony and Microsoft should copy from Nintendo. Respondents wrote in with several suggestions, some more helpful than others.

I believe they should put more of an emphasis on couch co-op. In recent years, local multiplayer is becoming more and more of a rarity. While headsets do allow for communication, it's not the same as being next to each other. Although PlayStation and Xbox are ahead of Nintendo in many ways, designated offline modes are where Nintendo has the edge.

Gabe Schraer

Nintendo has always been accessible to non-gamers, as seen with games that almost anyone can play, like Wii Sports. Microsoft tried to piggyback on the company's successes with the Kinect and Sony with the Move controller, but Nintendo remains the champion of pick-up-and-play games. I believe that Sony and Microsoft should focus more energy on first-party casual games to entice a new market of players.

Emily Lewis

As a longtime Nintendo fan, the answer is simple: Sony and Microsoft should learn the savvy business move of withholding stock of their products. My five-month ordeal of calling stores daily for the NES Classic – only to find out it is now discontinued – has bolstered my level of faith and loyalty to Nintendo to a level where I would die for them.

Grant Coscia

More Co-op Concerns

In issue 289, you responded to a 60-year-old gamer's query about split-screen co-op (No Country For Old Co-op Partners). I loved the respect you showed us older gamers who enjoy playing with our kids (or getting better on our own during school hours). Is there any chance that a console might give us two video outs or run a game on two monitors? It's a bit of an investment buying two consoles and two copies of each game to play side by side. I would certainly pay an extra 100 or 200 for that ability. Thanks again for the old gamer props!

Jeff Koch
via email

After reading the letter on co-op, I was reminded of my childhood. I grew up in the '90s when some of the best games featured co-op modes that made siblings like my brother and I grow closer. I really wish couch co-op would make a comeback. I'd also like to see a Top 10 Co-op Games list in a future issue to make people remember the good old days of gaming.

Eric Nyman
via email

Alas, there really isn't a multi-display solution for consoles, and while setting up more than one monitor on PC is straightforward, few developers offer split-screen support on the platform. As for a Top 10 Co-op list, we can do you three times better: Issue 233 contained our list of the Top 30 co-op games of all-time, and you can check out our picks for the best couch co-op games of this generation at gameinformer.com.



(Left) Community super fans Keith Norberg, Kathryn Scrafford, and Hilary Wilton were all smiles after the Game Informer panel at this year's GlitchCon.

(Right) U of M journalism major Dalton Tuskowski got a quick tour of the G.I. vault after his one-on-one with Reeves.



(continued on page 10)

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1



WINNER

1 Evan Pataki

The only way this art would be any cooler is if it was airbrushed onto the side of a van.

2 Heather Martini

Either Spawn is squatting on the top of a boulder, or he just took the biggest dump in superhero history.

3 Maleah Walker

We'd totally play a chibi version of Journey.

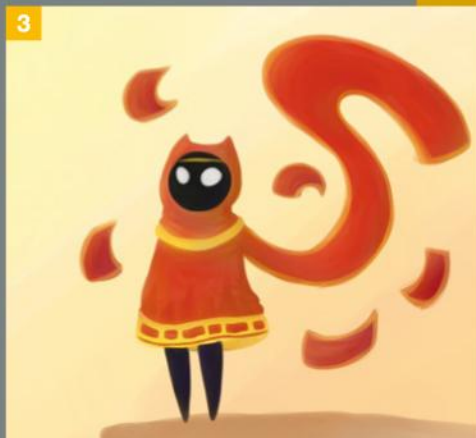
4 Caylee Lovinfosse

If your dreams involve a talking, psychedelic whale, you know you're doing something right.

2



3



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(Left) Move over, Mickey – The first stop on Reiner's family trip to Orlando was this year's Star Wars Celebration, where he introduced his daughter Evi to the military might of the Galactic Empire.

(Right) The Video Game History Foundation director Frank Cifaldi spent half the month embedded in the G.I. offices, examining a treasure trove of old games, documents, and other paraphernalia. Learn all about his archeology expedition at gameinformer.com/gishow.



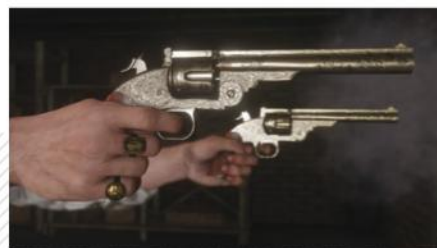


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NOTABLES

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DEAD DELAY



Rockstar postpones Red Dead Redemption 2 into spring 2018

by Matt Bertz

Much to the dismay of impatient fans, Rockstar Games decided the sequel to one of the best games of the last console generation needs more development time. Originally scheduled to launch this fall, those itching to explore the “vast and unforgiving American heartland” of Red Dead Redemption 2 must now wait until next spring.

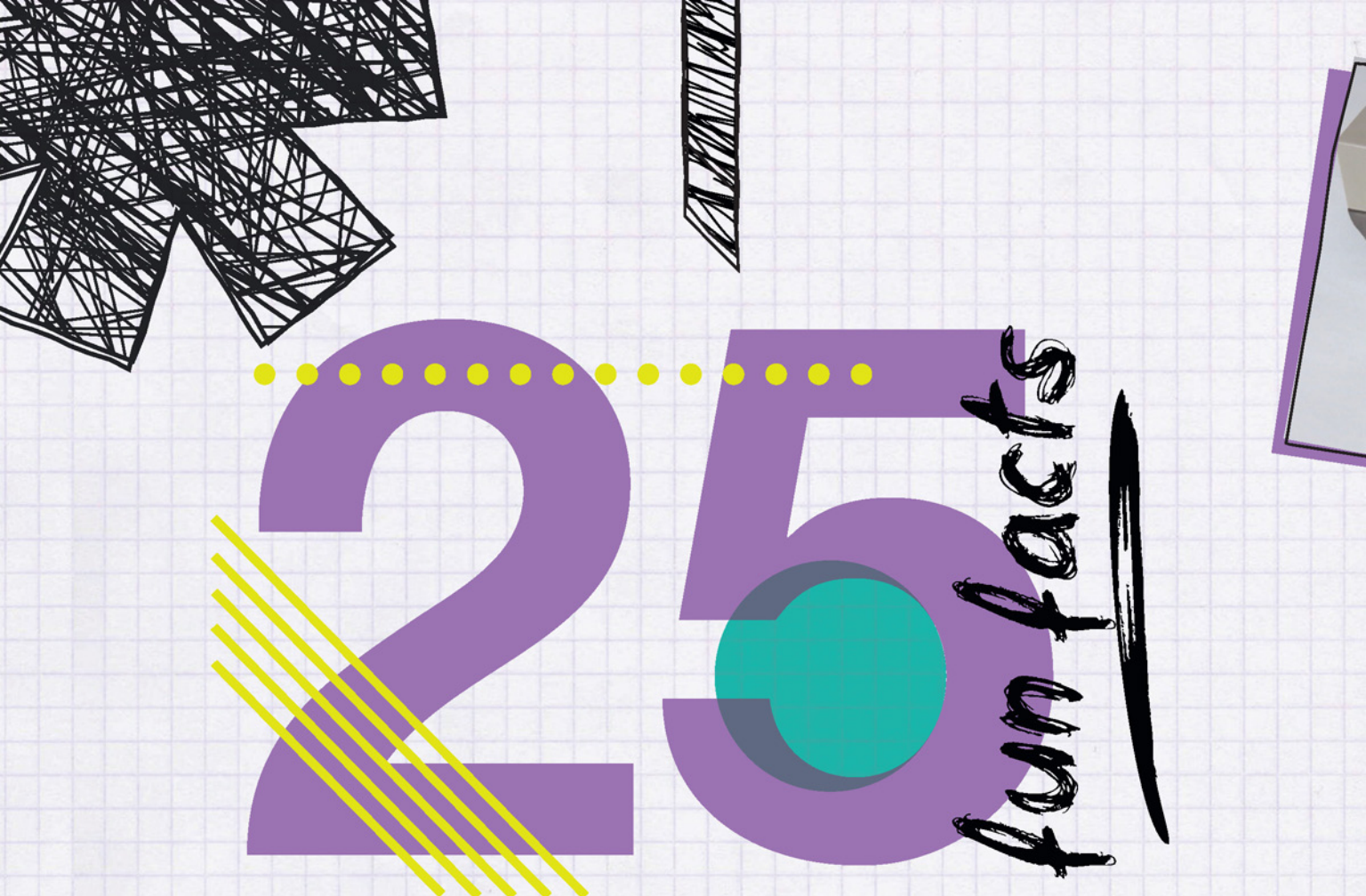
“We are very sorry for any disappointment this delay causes, but we are firm believers in delivering a game only when it is ready,” Rockstar said in an official statement.

Given the lack of information about the game made available to the public thus far, the delay wasn’t surprising. It also shouldn’t be too upsetting considering Rockstar has a good track record of delivering quality games after a delay. The last title that the company pushed back, Grand Theft Auto V, shipped with a high level of polish and is still a mainstay in game sales charts despite originally releasing in 2013.

Along with the delay news, the studio released a fresh batch of screenshots showcasing the game’s gorgeous landscapes, remarkable attention to detail, and fearsome outlaws. Rockstar still hasn’t given us a good glimpse of these characters’ faces, but several images now have featured a burly man wearing a duster and cowboy hat with a braided twine band. Could this be the protagonist? Multiple images show dual-wielding pistols as well, with one character holding two different revolvers.

Rockstar says we’ll see more of the game this summer, so we should find out soon. ♦





25 fun facts

About Video Games You Likely Didn't Know



You may have an encyclopedic knowledge of a game, but you likely don't know all of the stories behind it – even if you complete every side quest in an RPG or prestige a dozen times in a multi-player shooter. Some of these tales stretch into the realm of the weird, draw inspiration from the strangest of places, or can be oddly touching. Other stories don't make a lick of sense. We rounded up 25 little tidbits that should give you a greater appreciation of some of video games' biggest hits.

by Andrew Reiner





1. The Nintendo Comboy

South Korea put a ban on Japanese cultural imports following World War II, and it wasn't lifted until 2004. That didn't mean South Korean gamers didn't get to know Mario. Hyundai Electronics distributed Nintendo's product in South Korea. The NES was called the Hyundai Comboy, which was superseded by the Super Comboy and Comboy 64.

2. Batman: Arkham Asylum was almost rhythmic

During the early stages of development, Batman: Arkham Asylum was prototyped as a rhythmic action game. The second prototype focused on 2D fighting, which would pop up whenever enemies were engaged, and involved colored circles bashing into each other. Both of these failed attempts fueled the basis of the final combat system.

3. Super Mario and Nine Inch Nails

Many of the Koopalings from the Super Mario games are named after famous musicians. Most people can see the pattern in Ludwig Iggy, and Lemmy's names. What you may not know is Super Mario World's fire-breathing triceratops is named Reznor, named after Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails, who also created the soundtrack for Quake.

4. The lion that would eat itself

Scribblenauts almost launched with a strange bug, in which a lion would eat itself if bacon was glued to its back. The odd occurrence was found in the late stages of A.I. finalization.

5. The lunch bell nuke

The satisfying "ding" that rings out when a Fat Man nuke is launched in Fallout 3 is the lunch bell from Bethesda Softworks' cafeteria. The Fat Man itself is modeled after an actual nuke launcher called the M-388 Davy Crockett Tactical Nuclear Recoilless Rifle, which was developed in the 1950s.

6. Master Chief is a radio DJ

The voice actor who has played Master Chief in every Halo game to date is more famously known as Steve Downes, a radio DJ dating back to the late 1970s. Downes was most recently on Chicago's WDRV "The Drive."

7. Lara Croft was originally Laura Cruz

Core Design animator Toby Gard wanted to make an interactive movie starring a male character looking for treasure in Egyptian pyramids. The character was deemed too close to Indiana Jones, and was quickly switched to a South American woman named Laura Cruz. Core ended up wanting a U.K. friendly name, so Core employees dove into a phone book and settled on the name "Croft."

8. A famous game developer is named after Final Fantasy VII

Chinese video game creator Xinghan Chen's name may not ring any bells, but you are likely familiar with his design work on the games Journey and Flower. Xinghan works under the name Jenova Chen. He was inspired by Final Fantasy VII, and took the name of the character Jenova when he started working in games.

9. The first video game in space

The Game Boy version of Tetris was the first game played in space. In 1993, Tetris traveled aboard a Soyuz TM-17 rocket to the MIR Space Station, where it was played by Russian cosmonaut Aleksandr A. Serebrov. The game was later sold at an auction for \$1,220.

10. Prince of Persia: Assassin's Creed

Ubisoft's long-running and highly successful Assassin's Creed series was originally going to be a Prince of Persia spinoff. The game was called Prince of Persia: Assassins, and it told the story of a female assassin tasked with protecting a prince in Jerusalem. After roughly a year of development, Ubisoft rejected the idea as it didn't focus on the prince enough. The game was reworked to the Assassin's Creed we know today.

11. Barack Obama campaigned in 18 games

During the 2008 presidential election, Barack Obama purchased ad space in 18 games that ran in 10 states. The "Vote for Change" billboards were in Burnout Paradise, Skate, Madden, and more that targeted the demographic of ages 18 to 34.

12. Left 4 Dead in *The Cabin in the Woods*

Toward the end of the movie *The Cabin in the Woods*, a gallery of monsters is shown for a few seconds. Along with other iconic film monsters, two of those creatures are from the video game series Left 4 Dead. Eagle-eyed gamers can clearly see a Boomer and Witch.

13. Rigged against the Bulls

NBA Jam creator Mark Turmell is such a huge Detroit Pistons fan that he rigged his game so the Pistons would have a better shot at beating the then-rival Chicago Bulls. "If there was a close game and anyone on the Bulls took a last-second shot, we wrote special code in the game so they would average out to be bricks," Turmell told *ESPN the Magazine*.

14. Nintendo's drug is the banana

In the Game Boy title *Final Fantasy Legend II*, the player encountered a group of opium smugglers, but Nintendo's censorship guidelines wouldn't allow that to fly in the U.S. version. Instead of selling opium, the drug dealers were forced to peddle bananas in the back alleys of this world.

15. Deleting James Bond

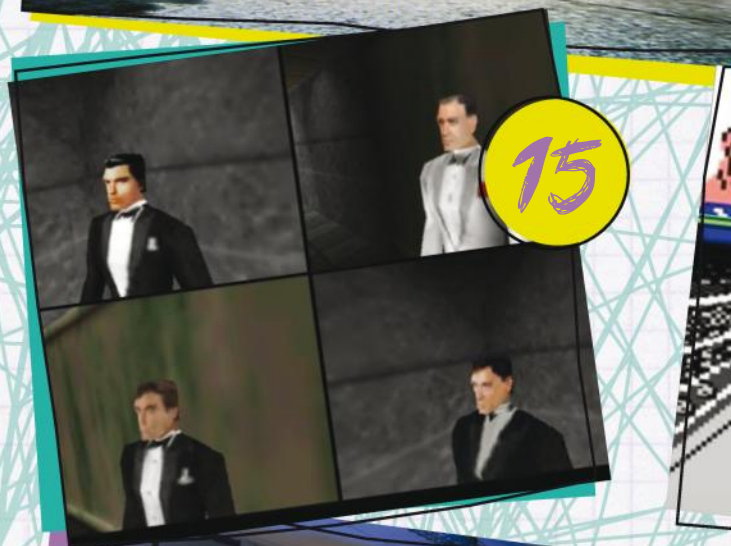
In the Nintendo 64 game *GoldenEye 007*, Rare originally intended to include Roger Moore, Timothy Dalton, and Sean Connery as playable characters in multiplayer. That plan was scrapped prior to release, but the character models for these famed actors were still on the cartridge. In 2005, a group called The Rare Witch Project cracked the game's code and found them.

16. The U.S. Air Force loves PlayStation 3

In 2010, the U.S. Air Force created the Condor Cluster, a heterogeneous supercomputer built using off-the-shelf commercial components, including over 1,700 PlayStation 3s. This particular system is about half a petaflop, or capable of about 500 trillion calculations per second," said Mark Barnell, the director of high-performance computing at the Air Force Research Laboratory. "In the current time that we can measure it, it's about the 35th- or 36th-fastest computer in the world. The Condor Cluster cost \$2 million to build.

17. Sonic the Hedgehog is inside all of us

A gene and protein that separates your right brain from the left, and determines you have two eyes is called sonic hedgehog. The gene's symbol is SHH. The name wasn't inspired directly by the game, but a comic-book series. A British post-doc named Robert Riddle drew inspiration from a Sonic comic his 6-year-old daughter was reading. The gene appropriately has a spikey appearance.



19



18. Lengthy Smash Bros. fan fiction

With 4,061,129 words spread across 220 chapters, a Smash Bros. fan-fiction story called *The Subspace Emissary's Worlds Conquest* is one of the longest works of literature in the English language. The book is written by someone named Christian, who writes under the name AuraChannlerChris. The longest published novel is Jules Romains' *Men of Goodwill* at 2,070,000 words and 8,000 pages.

19. Xbox was almost the DirectX Box

In 1999, Microsoft's Ed Fries met with the DirectX team to discuss a new idea called the DirectX Box, a PC with a hidden Windows OS that would be marketed like a console machine. The first mockup of the DirectX Box was a silver X with a PC board inside. As the project moved through development, Windows was dropped, the console look changed, and it was eventually renamed Xbox.

20. Final Fantasy VII was a Nintendo exclusive

Numbered Final Fantasy games were Nintendo exclusives until Square Soft realized the Nintendo 64 wasn't capable of achieving its vision for the next installment in the series. That game was Final Fantasy VII. Due to the storage limitations of cartridges, Square created Final Fantasy VII exclusively for PlayStation. An ad for the game mocked Nintendo's medium, saying "Someone get the guys who make cartridge games a cigarette and a blindfold. Possibly the greatest game ever made is available only on PlayStation. Good thing, if it were available on cartridge, it'd retail for around \$1,200."

21. Gandhi, the aggressor

In the first Civilization game, Gandhi's aggression rating was the lowest score of one, meaning he didn't want to make war. However, if a player chose democracy, his aggression dropped two points. Instead of falling to negative one, the number looped around to 255, the highest aggression rating possible. Democracy turned Gandhi into a nuke-firing titan.

22. People are blocks

Ever wonder where all of the people in the Mushroom Kingdom are? In the manual for Super Mario Bros. on NES, a short story summary says the Koopas turned all of the land's people into blocks, stones, and field horse-hair plants. Think of that the next time you make Mario jump into a block.

23. The smells of soccer and racing

The U.K. versions of FIFA 2001 and Gran Turismo 2 shipped with the peculiar idea of "scratch and sniff" discs. If you scratched FIFA's disc, you would "smell the pitch." Rubbing Gran Turismo 2's disc would deliver an "authentic pit-stop smell."

24. The many names of Soda Popinski

The wonderfully named Soda Popinski from Mike Tyson's Punch-Out originally boxed under the guise Vodka Drunkenski in the arcade game Super Punch-Out. In an unlicensed port to Commodore 64 called Frank Bruno's Boxing, his name was changed to Andra Puncharedov.

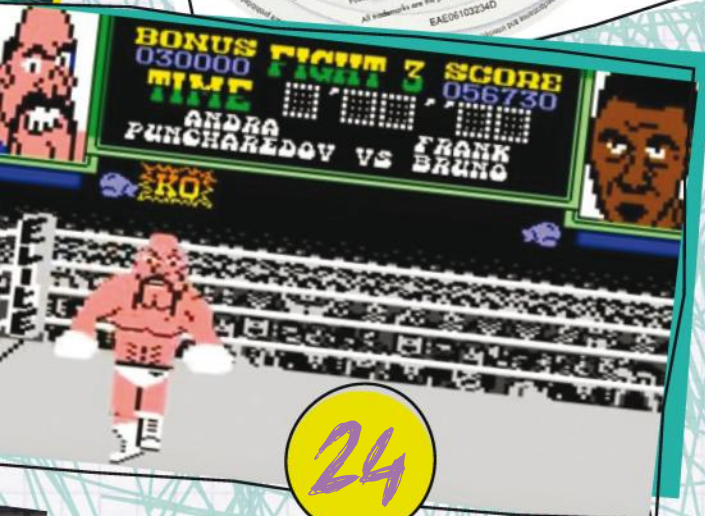
25. A little-known Halo 4 cameo

Comedians Conan O'Brien and Andy Richter visited 343 Industries for a spoof skit in an episode of *Conan*, in which they recorded audio for dockworkers aboard a spaceship. This audio made it into Halo 4 in a level called Shutdown. You'll need to stand next to two specific dockworkers for a couple of minutes to trigger their dialogue. ♦

23



24



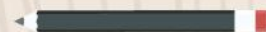
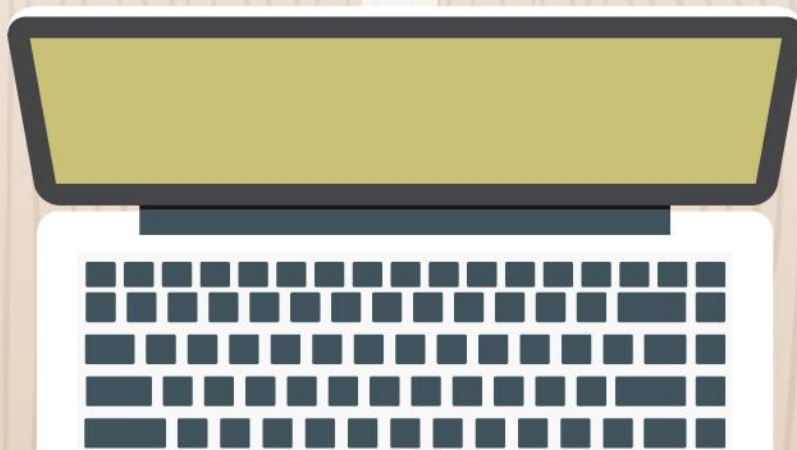
25





Game Development in Co-op Mode

INSIDE THE LIVES OF FAMILIES AND COUPLES
THAT MAKE GAMES TOGETHER



Building and sustaining a healthy relationship has its share of ups and downs, and mixing that with game development can be an even greater feat. Although the term “don’t mix business with pleasure” suggests relationships and work should remain separate, some couples in the games industry believe otherwise.

From Perception’s developer duo running a studio from home while taking care of four kids, to the family trauma that drove That Dragon, Cancer’s creators to build an emotional game, it’s clear that for some, making games is best accomplished when it’s a two-way street.

by Elise Favis

TWO IS BETTER THAN ONE

Putting aside differences is one thing, but for Amanda and Bill Gardner, the creators of horror game Perception, differing backgrounds ended up influencing their work in positive ways. By combining their diverse talents and applying them toward the game, they found innovation through each other’s strengths.

Perception’s concept, which puts you in the shoes of a blind woman who uses echolocation to navigate a haunted house, is something Bill came up with in grad school after a creative exercise. Following the closure of Irrational Games, his prior employer, he switched over to the indie scene and began collaborating with his wife to make Perception.

With Amanda’s background in English and Bill being a games-industry veteran, the two come from significantly different areas. Learning the ropes happens on both sides, with Bill better understanding the ins and outs of literary references, and Amanda rethinking how a story can be told for an interactive medium.

“If you’re a couple working together, it’s very important to take a step back and constantly evaluate where you’re

at and how things are working,” Bill says. “Because I’ve collaborated with Amanda for so long, it’s easy for me to forget that she doesn’t know every last little inside-baseball term we have in games.”

They may have different backgrounds, but their love of games is mutually strong. Video games are a family affair, and often they play with their four kids. Even their infant daughter, Rinoa, is named after the Final Fantasy VIII character. Despite different career paths, their similar interests in movies, shows, and more has made collaboration easier.

“We’ve been together for 17 years,” Amanda says. “I can reference a scene or thing and know we’ve seen it together. It definitely cuts the time down because you don’t have to explain it.”

Amanda and Bill aren’t the only couple that see collaborating on video game development as a positive experience. James and Michelle Silva, who have been married for five years, developed action/RPG Salt & Sanctuary together.

The two are so passionate about their work that even during their honeymoon they would spend evenings working on their game. “I mean, what are you supposed to do after

dark on your honeymoon, but code tools?” jokes James.

Working under the same roof, and often in the same room, James and Michelle are careful to not push each other’s buttons. They describe themselves as “emotional sponges of each other,” often sharing similar highs and lows. But this doesn’t mean working together is always smooth sailing.

CLASHING PERSPECTIVES

Working closely with a significant other can be tough, with emotions stronger than they would be with an average coworker. Communication and openness are key to success, but sometimes other factors come into play.

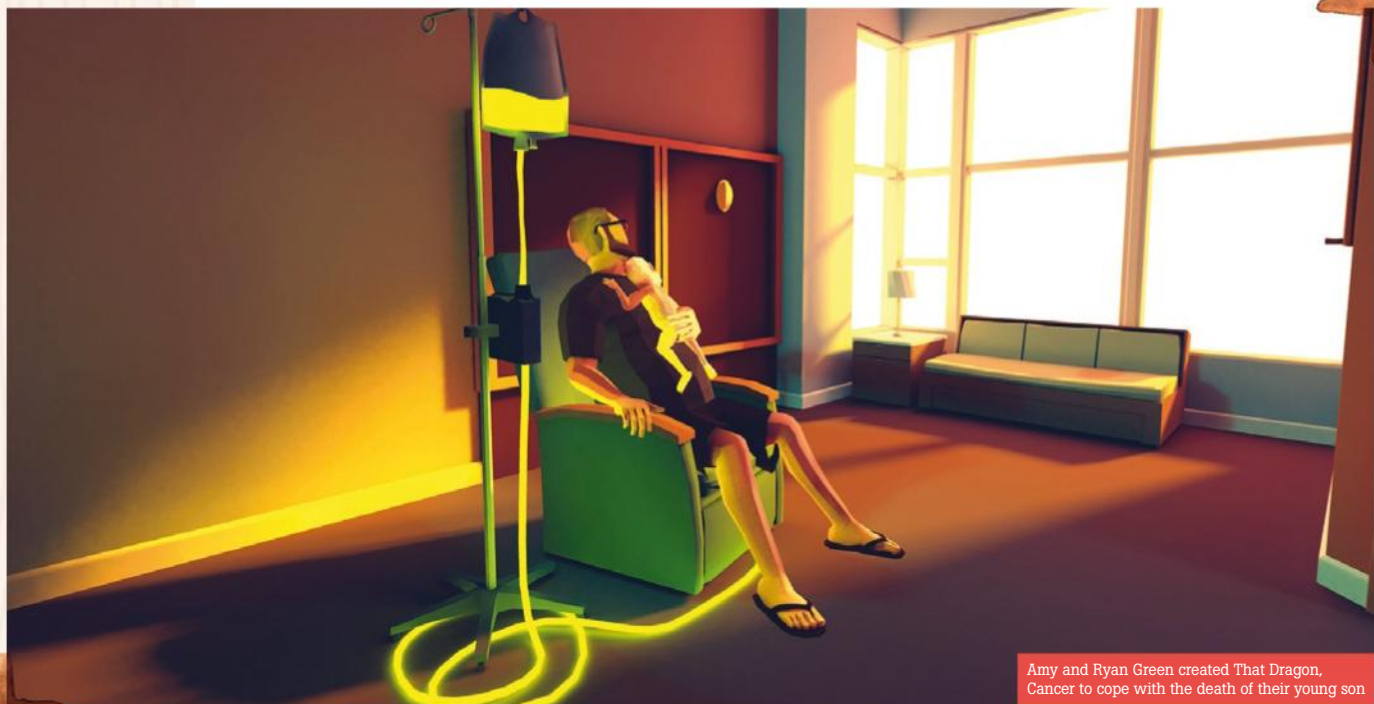
Before Michelle came into his life, James always worked solo. As both programmer and creative lead of Ska Studios, James sees his work largely as his brainchild. Sometimes this balance of control leads to minor conflicts.

“We try really hard to work together and have a shared vision,” James says. “But the problem is I’m the coder and I attach everything together. Subconsciously or otherwise, I tend to just do it my way.”

Despite these difficulties, James and Michelle don’t recall ever having

Following Irrational Games’ closure, Bill Gardner began working on horror game Perception with his wife





Amy and Ryan Green created *That Dragon, Cancer* to cope with the death of their young son

a significant fight that affected their work. Comparatively, Perception's Amanda and Bill had qualms about working together, but also managed to push through.

"That was something I was personally a little bit apprehensive about going in," Bill says. "We had collaborated for years and years on everything. I knew her perspective, I knew her style, and all of that. But you know, when you're actually working in the trenches together, you never know how it's going to go."

This uncertainty can be a deal-breaker for some, and certain couples that work on games together face problems that can become unsolvable. This is what happened to Jessica Curry, who stepped down from working alongside her husband Dan Pinchbeck at *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* developer The Chinese Room in 2015. In a lengthy blog post, she noted how working alongside her husband caused issues. Whether it was the press giving all the credit to her husband, or even Dan himself discrediting her, she felt it was wise and healthy to step away from working alongside him.

"On a personal level I look back at my huge contribution to the games that we've made and I have had to watch Dan get the credit time and time again," Curry wrote in the post. "I've realized that the only way I'm going to get credit for the work that I do is if I take a step away from Dan."

This decision, while difficult, helped the couple move past this problem. As for Amy and Ryan Green, a couple from Colorado, they turned to game development to cope with trauma and heartbreak.

COLLABORATING ON REAL-LIFE EXPERIENCES

When Amy and Ryan first began making *That Dragon, Cancer*, a game about their young son Joel's battle with cancer, they believed wholeheartedly he was going to live. When he passed away at the age of five, the game's tone and premise shifted, and so did the couple's relationship.

At one year old, Joel was diagnosed with a cancerous brain tumor. Nearing the age of two, doctors told the Greens he had three weeks to four months to live. Despite this, Joel kept living for a few more years. The couple began working on *That Dragon, Cancer*, feeling as though they were "documenting a miracle."

When Joel passed away midway through the game's development, Amy explains that the creative direction "pivoted a little bit." Nonetheless, hope was a strong emotion they wished for

the game to convey, because of their Christian faith, resilience, and love for their son.

Amy says after hearing the game pitch from Ryan, she felt apprehensive. "I told him that's not a game," she says. "No one wants to play something terrible. It was terrible to live [through]. But I think at that point I just wasn't as aware of the whole genre of meaningful games."

Following positive reception from the game's reveal, both Amy and Ryan felt it was clear that the game had promise – not just as a way to process the difficult emotions from the trauma, but to share their story in a meaningful way.

To make both their relationship and game work, Amy and Ryan had to be incredibly honest with each other. Instead of struggling to communicate, often they are guilty of communicating too much.



Wavering faith and a sense of despair were constant issues, but were then used as fuel for That Dragon, Cancer. For example, midway through the game, Amy sits in a boat while Ryan struggles to stay afloat in the water. It's a symbolic moment that gives insight into the friction between the two.

When difficulties arose, Amy would look to her faith for answers, feeling strongly that things would prevail, whereas Ryan could feel hopeless. "It was challenging to have Ryan sometimes be so despairing when I felt so full of faith," Amy says.

Despite the hardships, neither Amy nor Ryan ever considered stopping production on That Dragon, Cancer. With their faith and empathy for one another, they managed to continue development. Ryan explains that he sees the game as a "gift to his family," and a snapshot of their life when Joel was still by their side.

A BALANCING ACT

As Perception reached its funding goal on Kickstarter, Bill and Amanda were expecting their third child. Halfway through production, Amanda became pregnant again. With a house of four young kids that also acts as the game's studio, a philosophy of flexibility runs deep for the Gardners.

"You have to be flexible and you have to have no expectations," Amanda says. "You have to understand that you never know what's going to happen."

The Gardners' development studio, The Deep End Games, consists of Amanda, Bill, and their sound designer, as well as hired contractors that work remotely. Perception was mostly brought to life in the couple's basement



Salt & Sanctuary is a game made by James and Michelle Silva, who have been married since 2012

away from the kids.

Bill and Amanda find working from home can be hectic, explaining that kids' schedules are "complicated" and that they must constantly adapt, but both are thankful to be as involved as they are in their family's home life.

"It's great to be able to just walk upstairs [to be with the kids]. Just being able to go out, that is my way of getting a breather," Bill says. "It's sort of grounding to reality because outside of that, I'm always entirely in the game world."

Like most things, balance and moderation can be healthy. For Salt & Sanctuary's James and Michelle Silva, they believe this is their secret to success. To wind down after a stressful day, the two do activities together, such as playing games or taking a workout class.

"As much as it's fun to work all the time when you're working on games, it's better for your health and your relationship to get out of that zone for a while and like go out somewhere together, work out together," Michelle says. "I've found that when we go do a workout class together, we're much happier together afterward."

Mutual interests and a combined passion drive these couples toward successful game development, but it's not always easy to collaborate. As games become more advanced and demanding to make, working as a couple is not always ideal. But with collective patience, communication, and a balanced life, the couples behind games like Perception and Salt & Sanctuary prove it's possible, as well as rewarding, to make games collaboratively with loved ones. ♦



Gaming For All

How the industry is striving to accomodate disabled gamers

by Javy Gwaltney



I like proving people wrong,” says Michael Begum, one of the best Street Fighter players in the world, unable to help flashing a cocky grin. I can’t blame him. Begum, a.k.a. BrolyLegs, has more than earned it, making a name for himself and rising to the top as the number-one ranked Chun-Li player in Ultra Street Fighter IV. If that wasn’t impressive enough, Begum achieved that ranking by only playing the game with his mouth.

Born with arthrogryposis, a condition that prevents muscle growth, Begum spent most of his gaming life learning how to play with controllers not built for people with physical disabilities. “My first game was Super Mario Brothers 3 for the NES,” he recalls. “I put my wrist on the d-pad and I could move my hand to use the directional pads and I could put my chin on the buttons. As long as the television was on the floor, I could see the screen and play.”

Begum’s not alone in his struggles with having to rig controllers or devise strategies to play video games. A recent study revealed that one in five Americans are physically disabled. How is the gaming industry accommodating this portion of the population? We chatted with players, developers, and advocates about progress in accessibility and video games to learn more.

Understanding The Obstacles

When I put out a public query to our readers, asking them about their disabilities and how it affects their gaming lifestyles, my inbox received more than 300 emails. Many detailed how conditions like blindness, cerebral palsy, missing limbs, and deafness get in the way of enjoying games. It soon became clear that the number of disabilities capable of impeding someone’s enjoyment poses a daunting problem for those who want to make video games more accessible.

Luckily, people are willing to take on that challenge.

The Ablegamers charity began life in 2003 as a blog for EverQuest. The organization has changed a few times over the years, going from an info dump for the disabled to its current form as a charity and nonprofit-consultant organization for developers. “We bridge the gap between the desire to play video games and the abilities that people have,” says COO Steven Spohn. Born with spinal muscular atrophy, Spohn wears a modified head array that

allows him to throw his head around to control actions in games.

“Every single week we get inquiries from developers asking us how to make their games more accessible,” he explains. “All of these companies – Paradox, Harmonix, EA, Activision – they come to us and ask us to help.” The willingness for developers to work on accessibility is what Spohn considers to be the biggest improvement in accommodation in games over the past decade. He recalls how Ablegamers took a camera crew to GDC in 2009 and asked more than 200 developers if they thought about disabled people when making games. Only three of them said yes. One person even laughed and walked away. “It’s been a great improvement in attitude since then,” he says. AbleGamers isn’t the only consulting group either. Former Game Informer intern Joshua Straub runs DAGER System, a website that rates games by accessibility and also consults with developers.

Cathy Vice, a popular game critic and accessibility advocate who writes under the pseudonym IndieGamerChick, has epilepsy and is also appreciative of how far the industry has progressed. “Five years ago, it was uncommon to see developers, indie or otherwise, include accessibility features. Since then I’ve spoken with hundreds of developers, including directors at major third-party studios, about accommodating players like me.”

Vice believes that it’s her responsibility to manage her epilepsy and not place that

burden on developers. However, she also thinks that accessibility features are becoming more natural: “These days, most developers have accessibility in mind from the drawing-board stages of creation... [Accessibility options] feel like they were meant to be there, not grafted on years after the fact.”

The Road Ahead

While a lot of progress has been made on the front of accessibility, there’s still room for improvement. Karen Stevens, who’s been working as EA’s accessibility advocate since 2013, is one of the people working at a major publisher seeking out how to improve accommodations for disabled gamers. Stevens has played a critical role in getting accessibility features in Madden NFL 17, which include brightness options and colorblind support. Other EA titles that include notable accessibility features are Battlefield, SimCity – both have colorblind settings – and FIFA, which lets players customize their controls.

EA allows people to send accessibility-related feedback to a public email address. “What I’m using the feedback for is to see what would make sense to happen next,” Stevens explains. “That doesn’t necessarily mean any feedback I hear will happen next. It just means that feedback is already on our radar, and that’s a step in the right direction.”

Other developers have taken up the mantle of accessibility advocacy recently as well. The number of accessibility options in Uncharted 4, which let players choose their targeting preference and let them hold down a button during quick-time events instead of rapidly pressing it, were heralded for how considerate they were. At the behest of fans’ requests, NetherRealm Studios patched in an accessibility mode for Injustice: Gods Among Us that filled the game with audio cues to help visually impaired players during battles. Begum notes that Street Fighter letting him remap his controller is what lets him play to the level where he can compete in tournaments.

In spite of all the progress made, new technology integrated into gaming brings new problems. Virtual reality is an experience that’s closed off to a large number of disabled gamers. “VR for people with disabilities is amazing – except when it sucks,” Spohn says. “If you’re somebody who has one hand or limited vision, you’re not going to be able to participate in a lot of what VR has to offer.” He also has concerns about the Nintendo Switch, which doesn’t allow third-party modifications yet, keeping people with disabilities from playing the console. “We get so many people asking us, ‘Hey, can I play Switch if I need assistive technology?’ and every time I tell them no.”

Still, as noted by disabled gamers, critics, and developers: it’s hard to deny the genuine improvements the industry has made over the past decade. From colorblind options in menus to controller modifications and studios explicitly seeking out how to make games more accessible, disability advocates seem prepared for the long haul and ready to strive for a world where everyone everywhere can play video games. 🎮



Steven Spohn heads up Ablegamers, a charity and non-profit consultation company that helps to make games more accessible for the disabled



A younger gamer uses a modified controller created by Ablegamers at a disability awareness event



Disability advocate Joshua Straub meeting with president of Sony Worldwide Studios Shuhei Yoshida at Global Accessibility Awareness Day

Indie Tales Of Imprisonment

by Matt Miller

We often group games around their genres or gameplay traits, but I sometimes enjoy examining the shared themes that developers are tackling, especially in the indie scene. This month, I spent time playing three extraordinary titles united under concepts of feeling trapped, facing imprisonment, and longing for escape.



Ghost of a Tale
PS4, Xbox One, PC

In **Ghost of a Tale**, developer SeithCG brings its expertise drawn from years of Hollywood animation work to create a charming tale about an anthropomorphic minstrel mouse named Tilo. The adorable fellow faces constant danger, starting with being locked away in a dank dungeon. The action/adventure that follows mixes exploration and item discovery with a need to confront foes, like rat dungeon guards, in brief bursts of more active play. Enemies are inevitably stronger than you, so it's through speed, wit, and taking advantage of numerous hiding spots that Tilo must survive, reminding me of the dynamic that characterized the classic Oddworld games.

Ghost of a Tale has a sumptuous visual palette, filled with details that meld a classic medieval fantasy with a world of sentient rodents. The setting recalls properties like the *Redwall* novels, *Mouse Guard* comics, or *The Secret of Nimh* animated film, juxtaposing cute creatures with serious and often bleak imagery. The atmosphere is imposing, leading to a constant desire to scramble toward freedom. Puzzles are simple but fun, like pushing a barrel onto an unsuspecting rat on a lower level to clear a route, or using a slowly draining oil lantern to navigate a floor littered with mouse traps. I was happily surprised by the polish and engaging moments of discovery, and after a few hours with the early access build, I had to accept the need to wait until later this fall for its release on Xbox One and PC. A PS4 release is planned for the first half of 2018.

Dead Cells opens after an imprisonment ends in brutal fashion. A body sits by a headsmen's block in the deep recesses of a forgotten dungeon, decapitated and left to rot. A glowing green energy slips across the floor to inhabit the corpse and bring it back to its feet, and from there it's unclear whether you are the green substance, the revived human, or some mix of the two. Regardless, the 2D action in the chambers beyond mixes the precision combat and platforming of the Castlevania games with a rogue-lite challenge that sees you repeatedly returning to your starting prison cell after each death. Procedural generation changes the layout of your

adventure on each subsequent escape attempt, and permanent upgrades purchased along the way help to give you a better chance at survival.

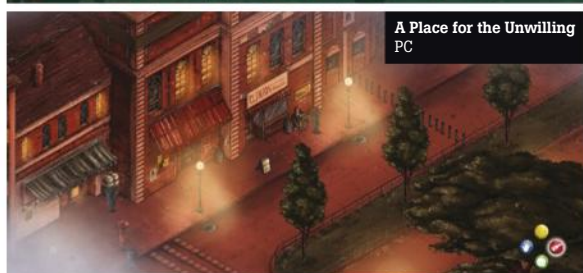
Developer Motion Twin has a great eye for tight movement and jumping, varied weapon styles, and challenging enemy patterns that demand attention and learning. Secret rooms and passages reveal additional money and item rewards. Teleport locations allow for quick traversal to discovered pathways. Intriguing new abilities and armaments appear gradually, and once unlocked, appear with regularity in subsequent playthroughs. **Dead Cells** is currently tuned to extreme difficulty, but its taut gameplay is hard to turn down. You can try it yourself in early access right now, or wait for its polished final release in 2018 on PC and as-yet undetermined consoles.

Your childhood friend has committed suicide, and left you his fortune and business. But to claim your inheritance and care for your friend's bereft widow and mother, you must move to a fog-shrouded city. Here it quickly becomes apparent that you are trapped in the city's steady march toward oblivion. That's the Lovecraftian setup of **A Place for the Unwilling**, a strange new narrative game from developer AIPixel Games. Citing inspiration from *Majora's Mask* and *Sunless Sea*, the pacing is gradual but inexorable. Time passes as your explorations continue, and it's increasingly apparent that a terrible fate looms in the future for all the people you meet.

Figures on the gloomy streets are shrouded in shadow, but you can explore the narrative arcs of 15 citizens through conversation and interaction. Instead of a win-or-lose story, the storytelling focuses on natural exposition and character development. Branching narrative paths for the characters and their city explore the inevitability of death, and at least one of the major threads examines the devastating income inequality between the poor and wealthy. Weaving through it all, classic Cthulhu mythos elements sneak into the story, presumably leading up to the disaster that waits at the end of 21 in-game days. I only saw some of the early conversations and character introductions during my explorations, but **A Place for the Unwilling** is awash in moody art and mystery, leaving me eager to discover the rest of the city when the game releases on PC in 2018. 🍷



Dead Cells
PC, Consoles (TBA)



A Place for the Unwilling
PC

The Good



Developer Dontnod has announced it is a year into the development of a new **LIFE IS STRANGE** title, and that the first game sold three million copies. The French company didn't say whether the new project will feature any of the characters from the first game or any other details about the project. Dontnod is also currently working on Vampyr, an action/RPG set to release later this year.

The Bad

PC fans can finally get in on the action in **DESTINY 2**, but they'll have to wait to do it. The much-anticipated sequel is coming to PS4 and Xbox One on September 8, but at the time of this writing, the PC version still doesn't have a release date. For more info on Destiny 2, turn to page 50.



HALF-LIFE 3 looks further away than ever, now that Valve writer Chet Faliszek has left the company after 12 years. Faliszek was a writer on Half-Life 2: Episode One and Episode Two, as well as the Portal and Left 4 Dead series. Fellow writers Erik Wolpaw (who worked with Faliszek on the previously mentioned titles) and Mark Laidlaw (Half-Life, Half-Life 2) have also departed Valve in recent years. 💎

The Ugly

g.b.u.
THE GOOD, THE BAD, & THE UGLY

Quotable

"Regarding the new IP – it is a title that we had initially positioned for fiscal year 18. It will be a multiplayer game with a strong live operation."



Ubisoft CFO **Alain Martinez** simultaneously announces a new game from the company while saying its release is being pushed back into 2018-19 due to the strength of the company's current and upcoming titles, including the just-announced Far Cry 5.



The Heroes Of Fitness

Getting pumped up with your favorite games

The Heroes of Fitness are married couple Timothy Spencer (Senior RKC Kettlebell instructor) and Nicole Du Cane (COO at Dragon Door). Hailing from the fitness industry where they met in Minneapolis, MN, these streamers are combining two things they love, fitness and video games, with an interactive exercise routine that's tailored to the games they play. Despite their focus on Blizzard's Heroes of the Storm, their name actually comes from the old classic Heroes of Might & Magic II.

Names:

Timothy Spencer
and Nicole Du Cane

Location:

Minnesota

Website:

heroesoffitness.com

Twitch:

[twitch.tv/heroesoffitness](https://www.twitch.tv/heroesoffitness)

interview by Daniel Tack

How did this whole thing get started?

Nicole: A lot of gamers want to feel better, they want to look better, they want to get healthy, but there's not necessarily a lot of approachable ways geared toward gamers.

Timothy: These can be outward gimmicks and usually the things are unhealthy, like energy drinks or other things that aren't actually healthy, so we try to bring actual health and fitness information to table.

N: We're not saying you need to go super hardcore and become some crazy crossfit jock to look and feel well. If you're sitting for hours and hours gaming, that's not really good for your body. You just need reminders to get up and move, so we thought here's an easy way to get people up and moving when they're waiting in a queue or waiting for their party to get ready, and just support people in their fitness journey.

How did Heroes of the Storm become your flagship title?

T: Heroes of the Storm is our core title, we sort of got into it playing Cho'gall together (Cho'gall is one character

piloted and controlled by two people), and that's become sort of a stream favorite. We've had a Heroes of the Storm caster tell us that we play a mean Cho'gall and that more pros should get married to take advantage of the character.

How do you incorporate fitness into gameplay?

N: We have a monthly PDF so people can follow along at home. Depending on the game we're playing we have a different routine, it could be body-weight training; it could be kettlebells, it could be yoga. With Heroes of the Storm we do a short little five minute break between each match, or on Dark Souls we'd do it every time we'd die. For longer period games like Horizon Zero Dawn, we schedule something roughly every hour.

T: For more action oriented or quick match games usually every 15-25 minutes we're getting up. People will come to the chat and tell us how much this has helped people get into a healthy lifestyle, whether they lost ten pounds, got the motivation to stop drinking pop, and all kinds of things.

N: Surprisingly we've also heard

from families getting involved, married couples and their kids, they all get into it, especially if we're doing something like Let's Dance. I never predicted that.

How did you get started in gaming?

T: I started out with Atari, Nintendo, the typical console wave. I started PC gaming when I was really young, got into all the Blizzard games, Command and Conquer, Ultima Online, and then World of Warcraft. I went through a phase where I was really really into WoW where it was affecting my health. I swore off video games for almost a year where I became really dedicated to strength training, eating correctly, and that's where I got into exercise science and all that. But I couldn't resist, and worked my way back into gaming.

N: I had a younger brother, and we'd play together on console all the time. I didn't get into PC until way later. I would sit there and help him with The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time as he couldn't read the cutscenes fast enough, and we played a lot of Smash Brothers and Mario Kart. Lots of Nintendo, but eventually I got into Halo and other competitive games. 💎



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GUARDIANS

by Kyle Hilliard



Trico

The Last Guardian

Guardians are a surprisingly popular name in the world of video games. Case-in-point: The Last Guardian. With its ambiguous world and story, it's never outright defined who exactly is the titular Last Guardian. It could be the boy, but most put their money on Trico, the adorable bird-cat hybrid and true star of the game.



Auron

Final Fantasy X

In the world of Final Fantasy X, Summoners are powerful magic users that require protectors. These protectors are called Guardians, and Auron is the coolest among them. He's worked to protect multiple Summoners through the course of his long life and wears a cool red duster.



Guardians

Journey

Journey is a pleasant experience free of strife and danger – until you meet the Guardians. These gigantic, imposing, floating creatures represent Journey's only non-existential threat. Being the lone danger in an otherwise safe experience makes them even more intimidating.



Guardians

Destiny

The defenders of The Last City take their jobs seriously. So seriously, in fact, that they made their job titles their whole identity. They're the guards of humanity's last outpost, so there is no room for confusion.



Guardians

The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild

Dug up from a different era of Hyrule, the Guardians are imposing octopus-like robot monsters that come complete with their own terrifying piano soundtrack. Breath of the Wild's most iconic enemy, they already have their own Amiibo action-figure and everything.



Guardians

Halo 5: Guardians

Bungie, who used to make Halo but now makes Destiny, called their new protagonists Guardians. Then Halo, handled by new developer 343 Industries, used the word Guardians as the subtitle for Halo 5. Weird, right? Anyway, they're very cool.



Guardian Deities

Pokémon Sun & Moon

Pokémon Sun & Moon's Alola region is made of four islands that have unique Guardian Deities. Tapu Koko, Tapu Lele, Tapu Bulu, and Tapu Fini each handle an island, and each is of the "We may be running out of ideas" school of Pokémon design.



The Guardian

The Guardian Legend

This 1988 NES game stars a "sophisticated aerobot transformer" called the Guardian who must destroy the alien planet Naju, which is on a collision course for Earth. She must travel to Naju and convince it to self-destruct mid-flight, which is a pretty awesome mission.



Guardians

Guardians

Guardians is a forgettable arcade beat-em-up from 1995, but it would be unfair to not include a game called Guardians on a list of top 10 Guardians. How could we not include such memorable characters as Zelda, Skullbyule, Tulks, and of course, P. Belva on this list!



The Guardian

StarCraft

In StarCraft, the guardian is a Zerg unit that can hurl bombs from far away. They're crab-like creatures who fare poorly in space. Why they're called guardians isn't totally clear, as they don't ever seem to guard anything. They just throw bombs.



Tonya Peat
Cancer Survivor

Morgan Freeman
SU2C Ambassador
Executive Producer
of the documentary,
The C Word

Be the breakthrough.™

Breakthroughs are the patients participating in clinical trials, the scientists and doctors working together to advance the fight against cancer, and the brave survivors like Tonya who never give up. Let's be the breakthrough. To learn about appropriate screenings and clinical trials or to help someone with cancer, go to su2c.org/breakthrough. #cancerbreakthrough





photo: Michael Poud

Shaping Experiences

Amid the shooters, role-playing games, and annual sports iterations, the game industry has an expanding niche for more subdued and contemplative experiences. Under the creative direction of **Ian Dallas**, independent studio Giant Sparrow has created two acclaimed entries in this developing genre: *The Unfinished Swan* in 2012, and *What Remains of Edith Finch* in 2017. We spoke to Dallas about the release of his latest title, interactive storytelling, and why he hasn't played *Gone Home*.

What Remains of Edith Finch released recently, so how are things going at Giant Sparrow?

I think we're all glued to Twitter and Slack, looking at all of the reviews and comments. It's just weird to have so

many different voices talking about the game – especially to see people on Twitch playing the game live and discussing things with people. It's been surprising how emotionally open some of the players are. Usually I hear

aggressive one-upmanship – that's my perception of the dialogue out there. But actually, a lot of people are willing to sit down and emotionally engage with the game in ways I didn't expect.

What's the team doing right now?

There are a lot of weird PC-specific bugs we can fix for people who have very, very old laptops...the game is running at 12 frames per second for them, and they're having a good enough time that they're getting a lot of the way through it, but then running into problems we never encountered. We're also looking into some as-yet-unannounced ports of the game and whether or not that would make sense.

The Unfinished Swan released in 2012. How is being an indie developer today different than it was then?

It's hard to say, because I don't really understand what being an indie developer is like today. I feel like I understand it even less than I did in 2012. From my perspective, the biggest change has been that there's so much more feedback out there. So many voices on Twitter, Twitch, YouTube – the game has so many more eyes on it. And it feels like all of the different platforms have matured a lot and carved out niches. In 2012, I had some fear that everything would become iOS – it would all be phones and tablets. Their growth curve was this hockey-puck shape, and then that kind of went away. There are games that work well on tablets and phones, and then there are games like ours that are better suited to people sitting down and really giving a couple of hours to it.

Have you ever had to change course based on how other games have altered gamers' expectations?

Because the things we make are so different in what they're trying to do, we're not really looking at other games as points of comparison. One thing that did come up early in development of *Edith Finch* was *Gone Home*. We were about six months in when *Gone Home* was announced, and that was a point when we were like, "Huh! This is a game that is also about a woman coming back to her family house in the Pacific Northwest in modern day. That's a lot of overlap." I'm somewhere between embarrassed and proud that I haven't actually played *Gone Home* yet. I've heard it's completely different, but I was anxious that we might be doing something related to that.

Is that just a time issue, or a deliberate move to avoid having it influence *Edith Finch*?

First one, and then the other. When

we were working on the game, I thought, "As soon as we come up with a really solid ending and we know how all of this is going to work, then I won't be concerned about influences from *Gone Home*." But it just so happened that day didn't come until a couple weeks ago. It was really, really close to the end when things crystallized and became solid. Since then, I just haven't had the ability to give *Gone Home* the time and respect I feel it deserves.

We didn't really look much at other games during development. The success of *Gone Home*, *Firewatch*, *Soma*, *Dear Esther*, *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* – that did make us feel like, "Okay, this isn't going to be as much of an uphill slog as we thought it might." Coming a couple years after games like that, it's been nice that we don't have to defend our game's existence as much.

Has the industry moved beyond debating whether these are games or not?

I would say there's a level of acceptance, but I don't think we've moved on yet...I think there's a lot of useless discussion that doesn't seem to go anywhere about, "Is this a game? Is this not a game?" A lot of that is because we just don't have a really good term for it. "Walking simulator" is a lovely thing that has come up as a pejorative, but has been embraced. We'll see how that develops. But it's easier than it was, and there are people who have identified themselves as the types of gamers who want these experiences, which is great. It's not like every game that's trying something new has to find a totally new audience; you can kind of piggyback off of other games, which is great for gamers as well.

If we haven't found the right term yet, what do you think we should call them?

I would say that it's more of an experience. A tool for exploration? That's a pretty long-winded way of describing it... I don't have a good description, other than it's fair for people to say, "This might not fit my definition of a game." But I think it fits anyone's definition of "interactive experience."

Both of *Giant Sparrow's* games have been compact. Has length been a concern during development?

I feel a little embarrassed at the end of these things, looking up from our work and saying, "Oh, it's actually a pretty short game!" But I think a

game is as long as it needs to be – and particularly with *Edith Finch*, we were very concerned about pacing. When you're dealing with concepts like awe and the sublime, it's really easy to go off the rails a bit...The whole game is about throwing people into unfamiliar territory and having them succeed beyond what they expected, then waltz into the next sequence. And that falling-down-the-rabbit-hole sensation is ultimately part of what makes it feel magical – and short. Because you are kind of breathlessly barreling through from beginning to end, you don't have time to get stuck and take yourself out of it. Players have an expectation of a game being a certain length, and it's hard to give them a sense of what to expect ahead of time.

Interactivity means games can tell stories in ways other media can't. How does that affect your approach?

This gets back again to a question of terminology. I don't really look at it as "story" as much as a moment, or an experience, or an emotion. I look at *What Remains of Edith Finch* as a way of building to some peak experiences, and a way of coming down from those. There's a story that helps provide context and anticipation and surprise, in the same way that music does. But I don't think this is a game that is about music, just like I don't think this is a game about story, either. It's part of those things, but for me, this is a game about the sublime – about creating moments that feel simultaneously beautiful and overwhelming.

What role does music play in shaping that experience?

Sometimes we'd end up with something that didn't feel the way we wanted it to for various reasons. Players would have very different experiences with it emotionally, and the music was the final hammer blow we could strike, which can be very specific. It's often a subconscious element for players, but in terms of the direction you can give to a composer, it's very surgical. "Let's do about 15 percent more whimsical." You can do that! That is, honest-to-goodness, a thing you can ask the composer to deliver. But "15 percent more whimsy" on the gameplay, even if you could do it, would have so many other effects. The timing of this changes, or the animation has to change, or all these other problems. The music was a really good way for us to give it almost an aftertouch at the end. The ball is going towards the hoop, and we can blow it a little bit to get it to where we want it to be. ✨

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1987

Dallas receives an NES as a gift from his grandmother. He plays *Super Mario Bros* for a week straight

2000

Dallas graduates from Yale and gets a job as a comedy writer for the parody newspaper *The Onion*

2007

While interning at Telltale Games, Dallas writes for *Sam & Max*

2007

Dallas goes to grad school at the University of Southern California's interactive media program. One of his prototypes is about throwing paintballs at a white landscape

2008

The paintball game (now called *The Unfinished Swan*) is shown at the Sense of Wonder Night in Tokyo

2009

Sony sees Dallas' *The Unfinished Swan* presentation online and invites him to make it into a full game

2009

Dallas officially founds *Giant Sparrow* to develop *The Unfinished Swan*

2012

The Unfinished Swan releases to a positive reception. Dallas begins work on a new game loosely based on his childhood in Washington, which eventually becomes *What Remains of Edith Finch*

2017

What Remains of Edith Finch launches to critical acclaim, praised for its clever mixture of gameplay and narrative

gear

FIGURE **HAPPY**

Rounding up some of
today's hottest gaming toys

by Ben Reeves



1 Breath Of The Wild Deluxe Link Nendoroid

Link's adorable face is the only thing Ganon fears. This Nendoroid figure from Good Smile Company captures the Hylian hero in his most huggable form. The figure comes with two face plates that allow you to give Link either a smiling or shouting expression. A deluxe set includes a wider array of weapons, a Sheikah Slate, and a horse for Link to ride.

\$59.99 | goodsmile.info/en

2 Persona 5 Hero ARTFX J

Kotobukiya brings popular anime and game characters to life with its ARTFX J line. The company's latest creation is this beautifully-sculpted 1/8 scale figure of the protagonist from Atlus' hot new JRPG. The leader of the Phantom Thieves of Hearts is ready to infiltrate your living room, right after he pilfers your bank account.

\$119 | kotous.com



2



3

3 Mortal Kombat Reptile Figure

Reptile is the last of a race of creatures from the mysterious land known as Zattera — but who cares. He's a ninja lizard who spits acid! That's all we need to know. Storm Collectibles' incarnation of NetherRealm's fork-tongued foe measures about six inches tall, features interchangeable body parts, and comes with a series of liquid acid effects.

\$50.00 | stormco.com.hk

4



4 Star Wars 40th Anniversary Black Series

The six-inch figures in Hasbro's Black Series are incredibly detailed for their price. Popular characters are constantly being added to the line, including the worry prone protocol droid C-3PO, the robed scrap hoarders known as Jawas, and of course that weird bear that always hangs out with Han Solo.

\$19.99 | hasbro.com

5 Titanfall 2 McFarlane Color Tops Figures

McFarlane is air dropping a couple new seven-inch Titanfall 2 figures into its highly-detailed Color Tops line. Jester is an experimental Simulacrum and bounty hunter equipped with a G2A2 assault rifle and SA3 pistol. Blisk is the leader of the deadly mercenary faction the Apex Predators who loves firing his G2A2 and Mozambique sidearm. How they meet on the field of battle is up to you. ♦

\$19.99 | mcfarlane.com



5

THE ART OF PERSONA 5

Persona 5 has more style than a Hollywood superstar. Prima Games' art book details Atlus' design process through a series of initial concepts, rough sketches, and final illustration alongside behind-the-scenes details from creator Shigenori Soejima.

\$30.00
primagames.com

KAIJUMAX SEASON TWO: THE SEAMY UNDERBELLY BY ZANDER CANNON

After escaping from a high-security prison for giant monsters, Electrogor hopes to reunite with his Kaiju kids, but he soon learns that the outside world can be as dangerous as the one teeming with guards. This Eisner-Nominated satire of classic monster films is clever and fun.

\$9.99
onipress.tumblr.com

THE NOVICES (LAST REACHES BOOK 1) BY DAVID GOLDFARB

This new fantasy series from the writer of Bad Company 2 and Payday 2 imagines a group of heroes tasked with cleaning up after a successful dragon-slaying mission. Unfortunately, the cleaning quickly proves to be more dangerous than the slaying.

\$3.99
amazon.com



What's In A Name?

Dispelling the myth of game purity

by Joe Juba, Senior Reviews Editor

I was playing *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, and despite enjoying my time with it, a lot of little things bothered me. Your weapons break too quickly. Your horse can't fast-travel with you. Your stamina depletes too quickly when sprinting. These are issues that open-world RPGs solved years ago, and the fact that *Breath of the Wild* received universal praise despite such basic problems was baffling to me. I thought, "If this game weren't called *The Legend of Zelda*, people would never be so forgiving."

I hear that sentiment often when discussing games. You've probably said similar things when playing an entry in a series with a devoted following, like *Final Fantasy* or *Call of Duty*. You feel like you are the only person who sees through an illusion – fans are blind to failings that seem crystal clear. But even if you think an "If this game weren't called..." observation is true, that doesn't make it significant.

These arguments rely on the assumption that games are composed of two distinct parts: objective mechanical elements that represent the true experience, and subjective smoke and mirrors that distort players' perceptions. From that flawed foundation grows the mistaken notion that we can experience the purest version of a game if we strip away the "extraneous" trappings – that we can (and should) try to look beyond the franchise and see a game only for the naked systems underneath.

The problem? Gaming doesn't work that way. We don't experience games as neat, compartmentalized components; all of the elements work in concert to produce the whole. As we play, we also take in the atmosphere, interpret themes, and get attached to characters.

Those things happen in parallel, building off each other, and they are precisely what establish a franchise's identity over time. That's why when gamers accuse each other of being blinded by fandom, they aren't talking about a simple name. They are talking about everything that name entails.

When you're talking about a painting – Van Gogh's "Starry Night," for example – you wouldn't say, "If this painting didn't have so much blue, it wouldn't be anything special." The blue helps make it special. The same rule applies to games. Could you attempt to remove the things that make a specific franchise unique? Sure, but then it becomes something different – the idea of a game distilled to its bare structure, one of many titles we ignore on shelves and digital storefronts because they have no personality.

What developers wrap around a game's basic mechanics is important. Consider two open-world titles from the last generation, *Grand Theft Auto IV* and *Saints Row: The Third*. The former is famous for being a sharp-but-satirical look at the real world and its struggles, while the latter takes an anything-goes approach to a bonkers story. If you strip all that away and look at the

basic framework, players are largely doing similar things in both cases. You're driving vehicles, shooting bad guys, picking up missions, and exploring large cities. *Grand Theft Auto* and *Saints Row* obviously aren't identical on the gameplay front, but my point is this: The writing, tone, characters, and aesthetics of these series color the installments and attract different players for different reasons. If you removed that layer and compared the games, you might still come to the conclusion that *GTA* is a superior experience, but that decision wouldn't be informed by the things that make either series notable. Gaming isn't supposed to be like the blind taste tests of the cola wars; you can't just cover up a label, take a sip, and point to the best one.

This brings us back to talking about *Zelda*. You can't separate *Breath of the Wild* from *Zelda*, and even if you could, it isn't a better or truer form of the game. Despite the little things that irk me about it, *Breath of the Wild* also harnesses fans' love of the series in significant ways. It plays off expectations and subverts traditions to create delightful moments, and those moments can have an even greater impact on players' overall enjoyment than a few annoying design flaws. I would rather have that than the alternative – developers striving to create abstract, platonic ideals of game concepts that deliver the same thing to all players regardless of context or experience. After all, that context and experience can be the critical difference between a good game and a great one. ♦

The views and opinions expressed in this column are strictly those of the author and not necessarily those of Game Informer



July 2017



GAME RELEASES

Tuesday 11

- › Final Fantasy XII: The Zodiac Age (PS4)

Tuesday 18

- › Yonder: The Cloud Catcher Chronicles (PS4, PC)

Thursday 20

- › Layton's Mystery Journey: Katrielle and the Millionaires' Conspiracy (iOS, Android)

Friday 21

- › Splatoon 2 (Switch) ②

Tuesday 25

- › Fate/EXTELLA: The Umbral Star (Switch)

Thursday 27

- › Danganronpa Another Episode: Ultra Despair Girls (PC)

Friday 28

- › Hey! Pikmin (3DS)

GAMER CULTURE

Wednesday 12

Deadpool Kills the Marvel Universe Again ①

Superheroes rarely stay dead, so why can't Deadpool kill them again when they resurrect? Writer Cullen Bunn and artist Dalibor Talajic reunite for an alternative take on how Deadpool could wipe out the entire Marvel universe. The first issue hits comic stores today.

Friday 14

Evo Championship Series

The best fighting-game players in the world descend upon Las Vegas' Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino for three days of tournaments in Street Fighter V, Tekken 7, Injustice 2, Super Smash Bros., and more. All of the tournaments can be viewed via online stream.

Monday 17

Thor: Ragnarok Prelude

The third Thor film doesn't

hit theaters until November, but you can learn more about this intergalactic story with a prelude comic series, streeting today. The first issue reveals more of the origin of the Incredible Hulk.

Friday 28

2DS XL Launches

Is the Switch the future of Nintendo handhelds? Not yet. Nintendo continues to support the 3DS and 2DS in a big way. The latest addition to this library is the 2DS XL, offering the same power as the New 3DS XL only without the 3D toggle. It ships today for \$149.

Monday 31

Games for Change 2017

Held in New York City and running for three days, Games for Change is a show dedicated to social-impact games that can better our educational and humanitarian efforts. The show offers a public arcade featuring many of the games that tackle social issues. ③

MOVIE & TV PREMIERES

Friday 07

- › Spider-Man: Homecoming (theaters)

Sunday 09

- › Candy Crush (CBS)

Friday 14

- › War for the Planet of the Apes (theaters)

Sunday 16

- › Game of Thrones (HBO)

Friday 21

- › Dunkirk (theaters)
- › Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets (theaters)

Sunday 23

- › Ballers (HBO)

Friday 28

- › Atomic Blonde (theaters)
- › The Dark Tower (theaters) ①



» PLATFORM
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» STYLE
1-Player Action/Role-Playing

» PUBLISHER
Ubisoft

» DEVELOPER
Ubisoft Montreal

» RELEASE
October 27


SANDS OF TIME

The Black Flag team prepares to take the series in bold new directions with Assassin's Creed Origins, the story of the assassin who formed a millenia-spanning brotherhood

by Jeff Cork







The brotherhood is established, its traditions enshrined in history. The feather ritual. The hidden blade. The creed. We take these elements for granted, but where did they originate? Was there a singular moment of catalyst, or did a series of events lead to the formation of the order? To uncover these answers, we need to travel further than we ever have, to ancient Egypt, where we meet a man at a crossroads. He is the bridge between centuries of tradition and the foundation of something that will last millennia. He is the assassin behind a brotherhood, and he is a harbinger of change.

The Assassin's Creed series has been around for a decade now, and at least part of its longevity comes from Ubisoft's willingness to take risks. In many ways, it's similar to the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Just as those individual films leap across genre and tone – from straight-up action to political thriller to tongue-in-cheek caper – the tales that fall under the AC moniker are varied while still moving a larger underlying narrative forward. The battle between the Assassin Brotherhood and the Knights Templar has been waged throughout history, and it's taken players through pivotal historical settings such as the American Revolution and Italian Renaissance. Along the way, the teams that make these games have altered the blueprint to suit the needs of each hero and setting. Assassin's Creed Origins takes the series to one of the most-requested eras and locations, and Ubisoft Montreal is reexamining the franchise in a fundamental way in the process.

In an environment that embraces change, Ubisoft Montreal squeezes particularly tight. It's home to the team that made Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag, which is an outlier in a series of outliers. The game let players live out their pirate fantasies in a vast open world, and expanded on the sailing and naval battles introduced in Assassin's Creed III. Its hero, Edward Kenway, was barely even an assassin. Though he learned about the brotherhood and its traditions through his adventures, his relationship with the order started as, basically, cosplay. The next few entries in the series took players to the French Revolution and Victorian London, but the Black Flag team wanted to expand its open-world approach and test the limits of the series.



Enemies don't patiently wait their turn when attacking, so you need to keep moving and make good use of your shield

Creative director Jean Guesdon says they started work on Assassin's Creed Origins right after Black Flag, in early 2014. He told his team to forget about Assassin's Creed for a minute, and just come up with ideas that excited them. "We did some cool prototypes – we knew at some point it would be an Assassin's Creed game, but everybody took a big breath of fresh air," Guesdon says. "It helped us get some inspiration to materialize where we wanted to go and what we wanted to push." Looking at some of the ideas that bubbled to the surface, there was one setting that would be a perfect backdrop: ancient Egypt. "We knew that for years fans were craving for it; ancient Egypt is something that always ranked in the top tier of the desired settings," Guesdon says. "We also wanted to show that Black Flag wasn't just a pure accident and to show that the franchise could continue to evolve."

Production on Origins began months before Assassin's Creed Unity released. That entry had a disastrous launch, with myriad technical and mission-breaking bugs, and Ubisoft responded by giving free games to

people who purchased the season pass. The following year, Syndicate was a more polished game overall, but Ubisoft announced in February 2016 that it was giving the franchise a year off, breaking from its now-annualized release schedule.

Guesdon says the additional time allowed them to take the series in the bold direction it needed to go. "To deliver Assassin's Creed Origins fully, we had a lot of systems to be developed to get the full seamlessness," he says. "To go underwater to the top of the mountain. There's not one big central pillar, but there are many. If you remove one, you feel that something is missing. This is why we needed this time, to fully develop the promises of Egypt."

"Doing a brand-new fight system, a brand-new A.I. framework – just the more time we have, the more iterations we can have and the more stability it'll have," adds game director Ashraf Ismail. "We knew we had quite a bit of time to build this game pretty early on, and so the focus was on how big can we go but still make sure that that scope was fully achievable and high quality."



Animals attack each other - and you, if you're not careful. Smart players can use animal aggression to their advantage



A NEW TAKE ON TRADITION

Ubisoft Montreal's reexamination of *Assassin's Creed* is apparent the instant you drop into the world. My hands-on demo starts with the new hero, Bayek, on a horse, and my eyes instinctively dart to the corner of the screen to check the minimap. It's not there. Instead, navigation is aided with an *Elder Scrolls*-style compass at the top of the screen. As you travel near points of interest, they appear as pips and other symbols on the bar, but the interface seems less cluttered overall. You can still pull up a full-screen map to get a sense of where you are in the world – in our case, near the Faiyum Oasis, in the middle of the country – but the team wants players to focus their attention on the world instead of tiny colored dots on a GPS-style display. You have another critically important tool at your disposal when you need to get your bearings, as we'll soon discover.

Bayek moves with intensity and a sense of purpose, which is a feeling at least partially propelled by a small-but-important change to the inputs: The run button is gone. Instead of pressing a button to switch into a high-profile sprint, the character moves at top speed when the analog stick is jammed in a direction. Bayek can assume a stealth-crouch position when he wants to infiltrate a camp or avoid detection, but otherwise he's always ready to run. It's one of many small details and established series conventions that the *Origins* team decided to reevaluate at the beginning of the project.

Guesdon says the team questioned nearly all of the traditional features from the series, which served as the subject of many internal discussions. "'Why are we doing that?' 'It's a legacy.' 'Yes, but except the fact that it's a legacy, what does it bring to the experience? Is it really valid?' Some we kept – reach high points, for example, we feel like that, especially with this world, makes sense – but they're not exactly the same. In our mind, it was, 'We need to reinvent, we need to refresh, we need to change the recipe. There's no untouchable thing.'"

One thing isn't changing: secrecy. Ubisoft Montreal is keeping *Origins*' narrative wrapped tighter than a mummy, so we don't know what our target, a mysterious figure codenamed The Crocodile, did to put him in Bayek's bloody path. Our demo begins about 15 hours into the story, Ismail tells me, and we need to get in touch with an informant who has information about our target. It's never as simple as talking to the first person we see. The informant is hiding, but one of his captured servants might know his whereabouts, provided we can free him from a heavily guarded camp nearby.

The camp is close, but walking in through the front doesn't seem like the best idea. I get off my horse and cut across the road to a small, sandy bluff that overlooks the target. There are some mud-brick buildings below, and I can spot a few guards. I press the left stick in to activate my Eagle Vision, and get a shock. Instead of desaturating the colors of the environment like the mode always does, a subtle pulse emanates from Bayek, highlighting a nearby chest and a few other interactive objects – but not the enemies. Now it's time to get a concrete example of how *Origins* is deconstructing *Assassin's Creed* gameplay and lore. Meet Senu.

MORE THAN JUST THE PYRAMIDS

Ubisoft says ancient Egypt has long been one of the most fan-requested settings for *Assassin's Creed*. That begs the question: Which ancient Egypt? Egypt's history is unfathomably rich, stretching back thousands of years. After looking at what they were hoping to achieve with their new game, the studio decided Ptolemaic Egypt, around the ascent and reign of Cleopatra, seemed like the best setting. "It's at this pivotal moment in history where the world before was quite known," says creative director Jean Guesdon. "Egypt was there, Rome was growing, and after that it would be different. In terms of embedding our strong narrative of the origin of the brotherhood into a pivotal moment that would explain why things coalesced like that, it makes total sense. If we would have picked the building of the pyramids, there was almost nothing: one city, several locations, and massive pyramids. Yes. But that's it. Here, we can play with tons of different layers of characters, of stories, of locations that have been forgotten."

The setting was particularly interesting for the art team, since there were enough records of what the world was like to serve as a solid framework, while allowing for creative interpretation of those missing elements. Additionally, art director Raphaël Lacoste says the setting is the most diverse in the series.

"I think when people picture Egypt – even the team in the beginning – they imagine it's a huge desert with brown color and sometimes you can see some buildings and some oases, but that's not the case," Lacoste says. "What is fascinating is that you have the Nile Delta, with a very flat landscape, and it's also very lush and very green – and also very dangerous, because you have all these crocodiles and creatures hiding in the swamps. We have a varying range of landscapes in the desert. We have sand dunes, but you also have the white desert with amazing shapes of salty rocks, it looks almost like an alien landscape." Players can interact with the environments in new ways for the series, too. Guesdon says Bayek can climb every cliff, rock face, and mountain in the game.

Egypt was home to a variety of cities large and small, too. "In the game we have the magnificent Memphis, with huge landmarks, and the very organic village around with all the mud-brick houses," Lacoste says. "There was a competition between Alexandria and Memphis, which were two huge cities. One was very Greek/Roman – Alexandria, with a lot of density in the architecture, but it was also very rich and complex. And the ancient Egyptian architecture is more minimalist, but very impressive also. The pyramids were covered with white sandstone, and you see them from this time period during the game." Other major landmarks from the era are in the game, too. Bayek's travels can take him to the lighthouse at Alexandria – one of the wonders of the ancient world – as well as its legendary library. And, of course, he can see the statue of the Sphinx before its painted exterior had been scrubbed by the sands of time.

"I think the setting for me is one of the best we could have done for an AC game," says game director Ashraf Ismail. "There's a mystery and a mysticism about Egypt that exists today. If we think real-world fantasy and magic, Egypt is up there."

THE ORIGINAL EAGLE VISION

Eagles have long been a part of the Assassin's Creed franchise, inspiring the names of most of the series' heroes ("Bayek" is a play off the hieroglyphic word for vulture/falcon, since there wasn't a symbol for eagle) and circling overhead near viewpoints. Their familiar screech accompanies the game's leap-of-faith jumps. Where did that association with the eagle begin? It's one of several foundational elements that *Origins* provides some illuminating context for.

Early in the game, Bayek teams up with the eagle Senu. Thanks to their symbiotic relationship, you get to experience Eagle Vision in the most literal possible way. I press up on the d-pad, and suddenly the camera soars into the air, where Senu glides above Bayek. I have full control over the bird of prey, ascending, descending, and swooping down to accelerate. This vantage point gives me a new perspective on the camp, and I can instantly see a number of enemies that were otherwise obscured. It's a lot to take in, so I press the left trigger to

enter a hover mode. Here, Senu remains stationary above her target, and I can move the camera around, tracking enemies that land under my crosshair, as well as the location of the caged servant. When I press up again, control snaps back to Bayek, and the targeted enemies remain highlighted.

"The eagle has always been a very important symbol, and we wanted it to have weight in the game," Ismail says. "Not just visually, not just through symbols, but also in the gameplay. For us it was a very natural extension to have this creature and make it a companion to Bayek."

Senu can take tagging one step further, highlighting the deeper A.I. systems that govern the simulation. With the press of a button, you can select NPCs, and their path is highlighted on the screen. NPCs have their own routines now, which follow a day/night cycle and include time for eating, sleeping, working, and, yes, answering the call of nature. Animals and ships can similarly be flagged, allowing players to play with the system and aid in hunting or to create ambushes.

Journey back to when the Sphinx had its nose - and a layer of colorful paint



The servant is on the outskirts of the camp, and he's not going anywhere, which makes my job much easier. I slide down the bluff and head toward the cage. A guard approaches, and Bayek crouches down behind a low wall before the guard spots him. I could let him go, but I figure it's probably best to preemptively take out this potential threat. I whistle, and jam my hidden blade into the side of his head when he comes over to investigate. Unfortunately, I didn't notice his friends until it was too late. They surround me, and immediately begin slashing me into ribbons. My Assassin's Creed muscle memory kicks in, and I wait for the right moment to counterattack, doing massive damage in return. Unfortunately for me, the familiar face-button prompt doesn't come. More disconcerting, my usual attack button doesn't seem to work – pressing X makes me dodge. I try to run, but at this point I've taken too much damage. An arrow hits me in the back, and I'm desynchronized. The sequence begins again, and it's clear that the old ways of approaching combat in AC aren't going to work.

COMBAT EVOLVED

The battle highlights how much combat has changed from past games, and not just because attacks are now executed with the right shoulder and trigger. In the past, I'd comfortably hang back and wait for enemies to attack, ping-ponging between them when a counter-attack opportunity popped up, and not having to worry about any of the bad guys who patiently waited on the edge for their turn. I hesitate to compare it to Dark Souls – there's no stamina to worry about, for instance – but it has more of that flavor than a traditional AC game.

"It's really based on skill and the abilities that you've unlocked," Ismail says. "You do have abilities where, when you launch your overpowered attack, you can actually combo after them. What that does is allows you to kill multiple targets when your damage is increased, but again there is some level of skill required; it's not a canned animation. The system is much more hit-box driven. We wanted gameplay skill to be a lot more valuable."

You must be much more attentive if you want to survive in Origins. Egypt offers a variety of different weapon types – swords, spears, bows, and more – with their own range and special capabilities, and knowing the ins and outs of them is invaluable. As you fight enemies, an adrenaline gauge fills up, and that rage can be released by pressing both attack buttons. That unleashes an especially powerful attack, which skilled players can use in combos.

I'm more cautious in my second attempt, and I make more of an effort to block incoming attacks with my shield instead of soaking up the damage and hoping for the best. I realize the importance of locking onto enemies with the left shoulder button, too. Bayek's attacks whiff through the air and leave him vulnerable if you aren't careful with your positioning.

I rescue the servant from the cage and sling him over my shoulders. "You'll be amazed with what you can do with a guy on your back," Ismail jokes. "Bayek's got really strong thighs. Really strong." Once we're safely away from the camp, the servant tells me that the man I'm looking for is Hotehpres. He's on a ship that has a large statue aboard it, which is sailing in the nearby Lake Moeris.

Armed with that information I call my horse and gallop to the shore. Here, I have options. I could grab a docked felucca (a small boat) and try to track down the informant with my own eyes, or I could call upon Senu and take advantage of her superior senses. It seems like a fairly obvious play. Senu soars above the lake, and a yellow circle appears on the screen. As I move the camera closer to the target, it shrinks to convey the fact that I'm getting closer to the mark. Once I aim at the appropriate ship (which, indeed has a large statue aboard it), the circle changes into an objective beacon. I hop onto the felucca and sail over to the larger vessel. Sailing feels great, and the lake's waters are gorgeous. They also hide secrets for those who take the time to dive beneath their depths. Players can loot sunken ships and long-forgotten ruins.

Once aboard the ship, I meet Hotehpres. He's sharpening a blade, and he doesn't seem particularly stoked to see me. "So now they send a son of Egypt after me?" he barks. "It has been a long time since I spilled so much blood." Before he attacks, I show him a small tablet marked with the Eye of Horus. This symbol calms him down, since he recognizes who Bayek is.

BAYEK AND BEYOND

Bayek's tale is set against one of history's most well-known rulers: Cleopatra VII, the woman we usually refer to when we say the name "Cleopatra." According to Assassin's Creed brand historian Maxime Durand, her story is incomplete, which has contributed to its legend.

"We know very little about Cleopatra, but her influence and importance is tremendous in humankind," Durand says. "The reason we don't know much about her is that everything we know about her has been written by other people. She left nothing. It's really hard to know exactly what she felt, who she was, what she looked like, precisely. We know very little, but her influence and her impact is huge."

Durand says that Cleopatra was unusual in that she was the only known female who ruled alone during that time period. Her brothers were supposedly ruling alongside her, but she muscled past them – even having one of them assassinated. Later, she had a son, but she continued to rule since he was only a baby. The kingdom of Egypt had diminished over the decades before she took the throne, but she was able to turn it around. "By the time of Cleopatra, she broadens it to its previous size 200 years before," Durand says. "She's fantastic. Let's accept the fact that she's one of the five most interesting people in human history."

As we all know, Cleopatra's story ends tragically. How exactly that happens, however, depends on which version of history you choose to believe. Conventional history tells us she committed suicide by allowing a venomous snake to bite her. If you paid attention to Assassin's Creed II, you may have noticed a statue of Amunet in the Assassin Sanctuary of Monteriggioni beneath Ezio's villa. According to series lore, the queen actually met her end at the hand of an assassin – Amunet brought the snake.

The Origins team isn't saying if they'll show that event – or if that era of the timeline is even featured – but creative director Jean Guesdon says that they won't contradict anything that's been established in previous lore.

DRESSED FOR SUCCESS

Having a large closet is apparently one of the perks of being an assassin. Players have been able to customize their character's appearance for a while now, equipping a variety of different costume elements and outfits. "One of the issues we've seen in the past is that sometimes people put on a cosmetic outfit because of the way it looks, but they'll change it because they want the boost of some other ones," says game director Ashraf Ismail. "So we completely removed the stat element." For example, in *Syndicate*, you may have liked the Gothic-inspired look of the Maximum Dracula outfit, but felt pushed toward dressing like a Revolutionary War soldier because that costume allowed you to carry more tools. With *Origins*, Ubisoft Montreal is putting more of a priority on the franchise's dress-up elements, while also making sure that it fits within the stronger RPG ecosystem.

Bayek can put on a variety of different clothing elements, including complete outfits. These outfits include

traditional Egyptian garb and clothing that's era appropriate, but the team recognizes that players also want to live the fantasy of ancient Egypt – even if it's anachronistic or pushes the boundaries of realism. One outfit we saw is a golden Anubis outfit, complete with a golden mask to complete the jackal-headed god's look. Another was inspired by mummies, but it's a more stylized interpretation than your typical Ace-bandage-wrapped Halloween costume. Costumes have multiple color and material variants, as well as special visual effects such as small clouds of sand. They can be acquired from quests and purchased from vendors.

Outfits aren't a primary way of increasing Bayek's stats. Instead, that element has been shifted over to a new gear system. Players can improve his breastplate, bracer, stabilizer, pouches, and hidden blade via crafting materials, and these upgrades are worth continuing to improve. Each element has its own stat boost, and how you prioritize

those upgrades is in large part dependent on how you play the game. The breastplate reduces the damage you take from enemy attacks, which is something virtually everyone will want. Bracers increase Bayek's melee damage, and stabilizers make him more effective with bows. Pouches increase the amount of knives and bombs he can carry. The hidden-blade upgrade is probably a safe choice for stealthy characters, and it also marks a significant gameplay change.

"If you want to do assassinations, you have to craft your hidden blades," Ismail says. "We have 40 levels in the game. There was no way that this was going to work if you were level 10 and you're able to assassinate a level 40 boss. It wasn't going to work. We're an action/RPG, and we have to assume it fully. You can still attack the guy, you can be sneaky, you can jump on them and do an air assassination, they'll take damage, but they'll get up and you'll have to fight them – it's not an instant death."



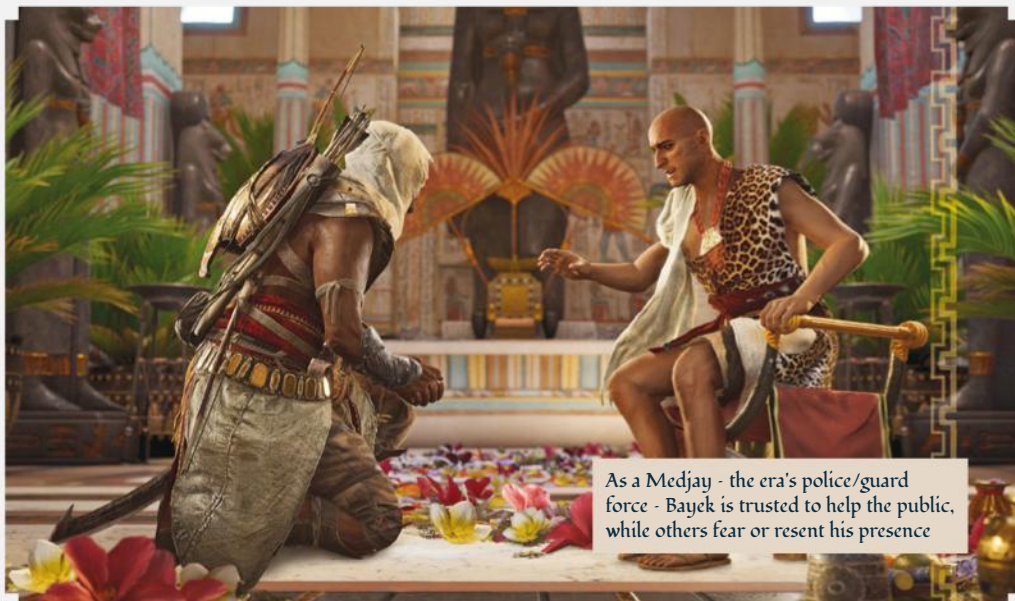
THE FOUNDER OF THE BROTHERHOOD

Assassin's Creed players have been mulling over several critical questions for a decade. Where did the assassins come from? How did the brotherhood's rituals and traditions form? The newest entry in the series puts players in the role of the man who can best provide the answers: Bayek, the man who will eventually form the assassin brotherhood. That's not who he is when we meet him, however.

Bayek is an Egyptian who has an important, but fading role in his world. "Bayek is the last Medjay," Guesdon says. "The Medjay were the police officers of the old kingdom, basically. He's really the

local sheriff, the protector of his community." The Medjay were originally an order of Nubian warriors and mercenaries, but the role transformed into a more formal guardianship position as it expanded to include people of Egyptian origin. The familiar Eye of Horus was one of their symbols, Guesdon says, acting as a badge of sorts.

Don't expect a sarcastic, impulsive character like *Syndicate*'s Jacob Frye or a ladies man like young Ezio Auditore. By the time we meet him, Bayek has already established himself in the world. During our demo, Bayek seems like a powerful warrior who carries himself with a deadly intensity. That doesn't mean he's a



As a Medjay - the era's police/guard force - Bayek is trusted to help the public, while others fear or resent his presence

brooding sad-sack, however. In one small moment we saw, he interacts playfully with a small child, kneeling down to get to her level and beaming with joy.

"In our case, we wanted the story of one man who was already grown up but had to adapt himself to changes," Guesdon says. "And as developers, we get older, too. We wanted to be accessible to a younger audience, but the story we wanted to tell was the story of a man in his 30s - almost mid-life for the time - and having to make some huge choices to change his life in order to change the world."

"He's on a mission that will eventually lead to the formation of something that has tenets and a creed," Ismail adds. "He's not an assassin right now. He's building toward it, but the whole point of this is how does the creed, how do the assassins come to be. The idea is that it's not one day they decide to do it. It's a journey. It's a journey that brought them there, and it's a progressive thing that he's going through. It's things he learns through doing his quests, through meeting different people, through understanding the world he lives in and what's happening to his world."

Assassin's Creed Origins is very much Bayek's story, but he's not the only important personality in the game. He's not the only playable character, either, but Ubisoft Montreal isn't providing any additional details on this element. We don't have any information on the scope of these additional characters, including how much time we'll spend in their shoes, if any of them are women, or how they fit into the larger narrative.

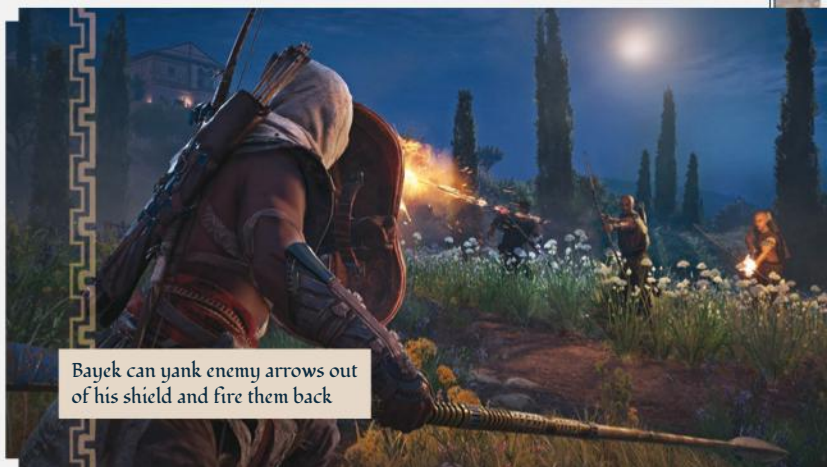
A WILD AND DANGEROUS WORLD

Hotephres calms down and says that the identity of The Crocodile is in a stolen ledger that was once in his possession. The bodies on the ship are but a few of his men who tried to pry the book from his hands. Unfortunately for them, they died in vain - the ledger is actually safe with his wife and daughter. Hotephres left it with them and sailed to the lake, knowing that if The Crocodile's agents thought he had it his family would be safe. Before he sends me off, he says that I should talk to some of the other people on his ship, which turns out to be an easy way to add some additional quests to my own ledger. One of them centers on some farmers who are being harassed and having their fields set ablaze.

As I sail toward my next objective, an indicator pops up that a small island nearby might be worth exploring. Pressing the left stick in, I learn that three treasure chests are scattered on and around it. It seems like too good an opportunity to pass up, so I turn my felucca onto the shore. The first chest is

easy to spot, but I have to use Senu to track down the others. They're invisible to Bayek's eyes, beneath the waters near the edge of the island. I dive in, and realize that I hadn't noticed something that, admittedly, is pretty tough to miss: a pair of hippos. Egypt is home to a variety of wildlife, and not all creatures are as placid as ibis and flamingos. I'm able to loot the second chest from the lake bottom without attracting any attention, but the third is too close for the beasts' comfort. They begin paddling toward me. I've been on the Jungle Cruise, so I know that hippos are no joke. I slash at them a few times with my blade, but it's obviously not the most effective tactic. Retreating back to shore, I perforate them with multiple arrows from my shotgun-like hunter's bow before they reach me. Now I can get that chest and also score some crafting materials in the form of hard leather. Thanks, hippos!

The first two chests didn't have much of consequence - some low-level common items - but the last chest paid off. It contained a rare copper sword that outclassed my currently equipped bronze khopesh, a common. Common items can have a single damage attribute, but additional effects are added with increased rarity. The new sword grants 2/4 points in the critical-hit rate, an attribute shared by my khopesh, but also has 1/4 points in combo multiplier. Legendary items can add special effects, such as the ability to poison enemies or set them on fire, but for now I'll have to settle for a marginally better blade.



Bayek can yank enemy arrows out of his shield and fire them back

Loot is a big part of the RPG element, and thankfully the team made some welcome quality-of-life decisions around it. Depending on how players outfit his ability graph, Bayek can keep two melee weapons and two bows close at hand, switching between them with the press of the d-pad. He can carry an unlimited number of them, however, even if they're not immediately accessible – players don't need to worry about weight or limited inventory space. Unwanted items can be sold to vendors or deconstructed into crafting materials. Weapons don't break, either.

I head to the farm and meet up with Zahra, a farmer who also happens to be a skilled warrior. She says her Greek neighbor has been taken by bandits, and she needs to rescue him. Never one to turn down a rescue mission, we head off together to the bandits' lair. Ismail says that players can acquire most quests in several different ways. If I hadn't spoken to the NPC on the ship, for example, Zahra would still be in the world, and she would have filled me in on the situation if I spoke to her.

They're in a multilevel building in the center of a walled, mid-sized compound. After scouting it with Senu – she really is quite handy – Zahra and I sneak in. My cover is blown almost immediately, but it's not a big deal. Zahra distracts the enemies, dealing out a fair bit of damage herself, while I hang back and fire arrows at them. A damage meter above their heads highlights predicted damage of each shot, which changes as you dial in headshots or aim for other weak points. Another archer notices me and starts firing back. I block his incoming missiles with my shield, and am delighted when Bayek yanks them free and adds the enemy archer's arrows to my own inventory. Once the area

is clear, I scale the building and extract the neighbor. He is relieved to see us, and says he will spread the word of our bravery. Now all that's left to do is find the leader of these bandits in the desert and take them out permanently, which is a task that is unfortunately quite difficult.

This quest has a recommended level of 23, and my Bayek is only 20. That difference is significant, as I soon find out. My gear is appropriately leveled, but I'm not well equipped against these tougher enemies. They hit hard, and it's a tricky test of my dodging and blocking abilities. I see the camp leader, a man who goes by the name Son of Ra, and I get in position for an assassination. At the right moment I strike, lunging at him with my hidden blade. It does a tiny tick of damage, but he tosses me away as though I was more of a nuisance than an actual hazard. It's a humbling change from how assassinations have worked in the past. You can still do stealth damage against higher-level foes, but the days of being able to one-shot enemies that are significantly more powerful than you are over. After a couple of other abortive attempts at taking down the target, I try to flee.

Because the minimap is gone, getting away from your enemies feels different. In previous Assassin's Creed games, enemies would chase you within a finite range, and to lose them you just had to move your assassin out of a clearly defined red "danger zone." I can't say for certain if the underlying A.I. is fundamentally different at this point, but removing that visual indicator makes evasion seem less certain and more exciting. Not knowing how far I needed to run added a sense of desperation to the activity – particularly since I usually only flee when I'm near death.

Since I don't have time to grind several levels to take out the Son of Ra, I resume my mission to hunt The Crocodile. Hotephres' family is in a nearby town called Euhemeria, so I head in that direction. There, I meet his wife and young daughter. Khenut says she hid the ledger safely in her home, where nobody could find it. That sounds like a challenge, so I move through the city in hopes of finding answers. Euhemeria is reminiscent of the first Assassin's Creed game, with shorter buildings crammed tightly together. Parkour feels natural, and Bayek climbs and jumps down when I want him to, even though the controls no longer have discreet buttons for free-running up and down.

Unfortunately, The Crocodile's men figured out Hotephres' ruse, and killed another servant trying to extract the ledger's location. I slay them all, but instead of the document I find a note written by the child – she's taken the ledger because it has caused nothing but problems.

Even though I'm near the end of this particular quest, I take a break and do some exploring. In Origins, you aren't locked into following the story as you were under the series'

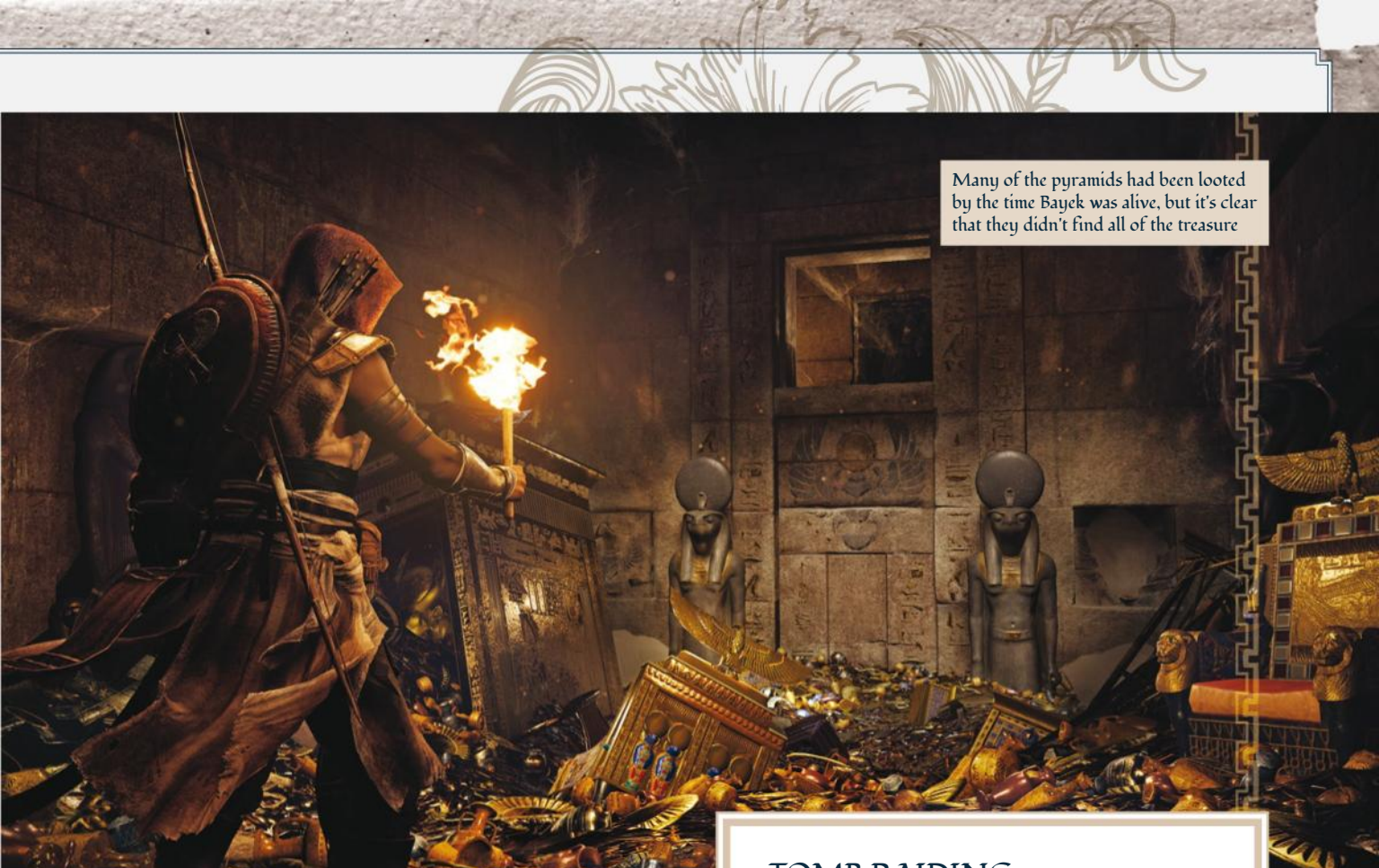
BETTER ON SCORPIO?

Assassin's Creed Origins is among the first games to support Microsoft's new Scorpio console, and we got some hands-on time with it to see if the game is noticeably improved on the more powerful hardware. On PC, our demo was running at a fairly steady 30 FPS. On Scorpio, the framerate felt more consistent, even at 4K resolutions. Other than that, it was difficult to see a huge improvement in our demo. The monitor was fairly small, so unless we pressed our faces against its glass we'd be hard-pressed to notice a tremendous difference from the standard version we'd been playing earlier.

Ubisoft said it got the game running within weeks of receiving their development kits, which speaks to the ease at which developers may be able to get their games ported to Scorpio. It's important to note that both versions of the games are still being optimized, so what we experienced may not reflect the final product. Still, it was great to see a game running on the new hardware, even if it's ultimately too soon to make anything close to a final verdict.

Players have access to a wide variety of weapons, with varying strengths, weaknesses, ranges, and more. A loot system features common, rare, and legendary variants, too





Many of the pyramids had been looted by the time Bayek was alive, but it's clear that they didn't find all of the treasure

old, mission-based system. You can break off and take on other challenges, or cut loose and explore. Knowing that I don't have time to finish the hunt for The Crocodile, I head to a town on the shore of the lake and see what I can find there.

Walking through a crowd, I see a priest flogging a young man. The priest wears a crocodile headdress, and he is flanked by two enormous statues of the crocodile god, Sobek. I speak to the priest and learn that the young man stole a pair of golden Sobek statues that were supposed to have been delivered. The young man says it's all a misunderstanding, and that he lost the statues after his boat was attacked. Determined to figure out what exactly happened, I look at the map and head toward the generalized location of the incident.

Two heavily guarded ships are docked just off shore, which proves to be a problem. Senu is able to see both statues, and one of them is submerged in the water. Retrieving the other could be a challenge, considering it's sitting atop a throne on the larger ship. First things first: Bayek dives beneath the water to find the most accessible statue. Bayek is a great swimmer, and finding the statue is simple. The waters are peaceful, but it's good to know that the same buttons that are used for attacking on land also enable him to swing his blades underwater, another example of the unified control scheme that Ubisoft Montreal has worked to create.

While I could hoist myself aboard the ship and start fighting like a maniac, I do my best to remain hidden. I climb up the bow of the ship, shimmy along the side, and perform a quick ledge assassination on a guard who has wandered too close. The other guards notice my action, but I'm able to hoist myself up and take them out with a combination of slashes and arrows. It really is seamless to switch between melee and ranged attacks, and it's satisfying to make use of both. Once the ship is clear, I grab the statue and get ready to return them both and presumably get a solid reward and thanks for clearing up this misunderstanding. Instead, the priest continues to punish the young man, saying he was a problem regardless. One dead priest later, and Bayek is on his way.

TOMB RAIDING

Ubisoft Montreal walks a fine line between remaining historically accurate (or at least within shouting distance of plausibility) while also indulging player fantasies. Bayek's travels take him across ancient Egypt, and he can explore the inside of some of the country's most well-known symbols.

"With the pyramids, we tried to make them as accurate as possible, but we pushed further obviously," says creative director Jean Guesdon. "Yes, we will have some puzzles, but I think the balance we found is interesting." He says that they're different from the environmental puzzles that players may remember from earlier entries such as *Assassin's Creed II*, but that their goal is similarly focused on finding a suitable path through an area. "We tried to move away from switches, because in the real world there are very few switches that open doors," Guesdon jokes. Instead, players must negotiate moving paths, counterbalances, and other hazards. "You will have to go into some tombs and at least one pyramid in the main story, but then you have others that you can explore at your own desire."

Players have more than 20 of these sites to explore, which include pyramids, tombs, temples, and other treasure-filled points of interest. Guesdon says his team is aware that the idea of having Bayek raiding these sacred sites may not make sense as a Medjay protector. "This is something we discussed a lot, because at some point it creates this conflict between the character in the game and the player," he says. "We tried to align the two as much as possible. When we had too many issues with that, we said, 'You know what, in the end the more important thing is the player. The player will probably visit locations that Bayek wouldn't in real life, but that's the beauty of the Animus.'"



Yes, Bayek can ride camels. And yes, he can also fire multiple arrows at once

CHOOSE YOUR SKILLS

Bayek is a man of many potential talents, and it's up to players to shape his destiny. Ismail has me pull up the ability graph, which is different from how previous games have handled the more RPG-centric aspects of character development. "A lot of us are fans of Final Fantasy X, and we wanted that graph system," Ismail says. There are several different major disciplines, and players can choose to spend as much or as little of their attention on each one. Instead of having a straight tree, in which players have to invest skill points along a fairly regimented path, the graph's structure provides multiple routes to skills, allowing for more flexibility.

"You can get to whatever ability you want quite quickly," Ismail says, adding that the furthest abilities are only five upgrades away from your start. "There is a cost to the abilities, and the cost does increase as you go further down, but we wanted it to be not too much of an investment if you decided you wanted that ability. That's why it's a graph and not a tree – so you have multiple ways to reach abilities so you can craft your way through the tree."

Ismail says that their internal research shows that there's about a

50/50 split between players who love stealth and those who frankly don't care about keeping a low profile. Rather than nudge players in one direction or the other, his team decided to build the game in such a way that there is not a "correct" play style. "We just want to make sure that all of these avenues are valid that they make sense and that you can play the game one way or another and it will work for you and you can play it," he says. "We're not reinventing RPG in any way, we won't want to claim that, but I think we are naturally reinventing the way people play AC by adding these mechanics."

The graph is built around three main disciplines, which represent three different approaches to combat and navigating the world. The Seer path focuses on manipulating the world to Bayek's advantage, such as through the use of poisons or by taming animals. The Warrior path puts an emphasis on pure combat, unlocking a variety of combo attacks and making Bayek a more capable fighter. The Hunter path is closest to a traditional assassin, granting players extra lethality with bows and increasing his stealth capabilities. Even though I can't unlock them during the demo, a few abilities stand out. Bayek can apply poison to a corpse, which infects NPCs who approach the body. The effect spreads and infects other NPCs, too, which seems like a great way to clear a camp. Senu can be upgraded to attack and distract enemies from the air, which should help infiltrate crowded zones. Players who want even more of a Far Cry feel – a vibe I've been picking up – can pick up the ability to tame animals.

Bayek's maximum level is 40, but players don't stop earning ability points once they reach level cap. The additional points can be used to completely unlock the graph, but the three main disciplines each have a final catch-all which can be leveled indefinitely.

"What I want to see is somebody at some point deciding that they're going to upgrade whatever the ends are," Ismail says. "The warrior tree, at the end, it just increases your melee damage. I want someone to level that up, which has an impact on your fists – you can fistfight – and I want someone to go up to the biggest boss of the game and one-shot punch them and explode them."



LINGERING MYSTERIES

We learned a lot during our visit to Ubisoft Montreal, but the team wasn't quite ready to reveal everything about the game. They bristled over a few subjects in particular:

THE FIRST CIVILIZATION

Egypt's pyramids are old. Really old, in fact. As creative director Jean Guesdon points out, more time had passed between their construction and Bayek's timeline in Ptolemaic Egypt than between where we are now and him. How they were built remains a puzzling mystery, which is studied by scholars and crackpots alike. It's tempting to say that the series' ancient precursor race, The First Civilization, was behind their construction. Unfortunately for us, Ubisoft Montreal's lips are sealed like a pharaoh's final resting place.

THE CURRENT TIMELINE

What's going on in the game's meta narrative? When we last saw our contemporary assassins, they had retrieved the Shroud, with the Templar no doubt hot on their heels. Guesdon wouldn't divulge any details about that element of the game, though he says it continues to be the glue that holds the franchise together. His team took a polarizing approach with the current-day timeline in *Black Flag*, giving players the chance to play as themselves as they began work as an Abstergo Industries employee. Was this first-person storytelling device an anomaly, or will they try it again? They aren't saying.

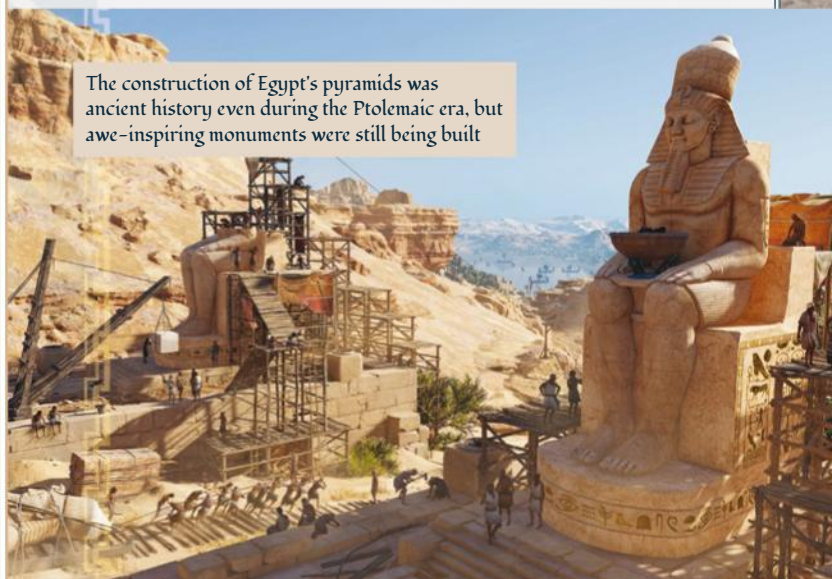
MULTIPLAYER

Assassin's Creed Unity was the last game in the series to include competitive multiplayer, which doesn't appear to be changing with *Origins*. That's not to say that it's an entirely solo experience – though Ubisoft isn't saying how exactly that works. “We have connected features,” Guesdon says. “For us, being connected will improve your game. Being part of the community makes your experience more interesting. We are clearly not a competitive franchise, and so it's more about collaboration and being part of the group and being part of the community will make your experience better.” Will you actually see other players in your game? Is it some kind of connected app? Again, they're not saying.

Players can choose to hone their skills as an archer, slink in the shadows and take down enemies with hidden blades, or go full berserker with blades or giant maces. Regardless of how it happens, one thing is certain: Bayek is a fearsome opponent. During his travels, he gets to test his skills in an iconic Roman export: gladiatorial combat.

FOR THOSE ABOUT TO DIE

The arena is about the size of a hockey rink, and it's designed for pain. Spinning, bladed traps are scattered around, ready to slice open anyone who's stupid enough to get too close – or unlucky enough to get shoved into them. Several combatants charge in, and it's clear that they're all determined to take me down. They wield a variety of different weapons, and the first thing I need to do is size them up. I'm forced to use a massive axe in this challenge, and I can go toe to toe with the spear-wielding foe, but the short-sword wielding foe might prove to be too fast to take on comfortably. Meanwhile, another gladiator watches from a safe distance while shooting blazing arrows at me. Combat is exhilarating enough even when you're not on fire, so I charge at the



The construction of Egypt's pyramids was ancient history even during the Ptolemaic era, but awe-inspiring monuments were still being built

archer. He's not prepared to take on someone that close, and he falls down with relative ease. I was too focused on him, however, and I don't notice the red tinge on the edge of the screen that indicated an off-screen enemy. Before I can celebrate my victory, I'm mercilessly poked with a spear before his friend joins the carnage. I turn things around, but after a couple more waves, I fall into the sand one last time.

Ismail mercifully pushes me through to the final round of this particular gladiator battle, where I fight a boss named The Slaver. That may be his vocation, but it's not the most descriptive name. Surely, someone could have come up with something better for a massive eight-foot-tall beast of a man. The Slaver wields a strange polearm with a crescent-shaped blade at the end.

Knowing that it's a high-stakes battle (and that the developers are watching intently), I play it more conservatively than before. I make the most of my dodges, narrowly avoiding The Slaver's wild swings and getting in a few of my own. I'm far from perfect – he manages to fling me into the traps several times – but I'm able to read his patterns and figure out when to charge my strong attack. I'm immobile during the charge period, but when I release it Bayek unleashes several wild swings before slashing through the air with a devastating final blow. My adrenaline gauge is a tremendous help, too, allowing me to stun The Slaver and hack at him with a cinematic flourish.

I finally whittle his health down to nothing, and the giant collapses. Now I get to make a dramatic choice: spare his life, or smash in his skull with a bit of debris. I chose life, and I bask in the crowd's cheers while The Slaver hangs his head in shame.

There's no gameplay consequence to letting The Slaver live or die, but Ubisoft Montreal wants to give players the choice of deciding if their Bayek is a man of mercy or an agent of rage. As with many elements in the game, players can shape this Assassin's Creed hero with unprecedented flexibility – even as he fulfills his greater destiny.

Bayek's journey eventually leads to the formation of something bigger than he can imagine, with consequences that will ripple across millennia. Ubisoft Montreal is pushing boundaries of its own, too. Could the studio's bold decisions alter the franchise moving forward? It certainly seems that way, but it's not something that the team is focusing on.

“Yes, there are potential impacts. We feel that we need to do it, and we're excited to do it as well,” Ismail says. “We wanted to refresh the franchise and reinvent the gameplay, and that's what we focused on from the beginning. I'm thrilled that we are actually modernizing AC and bringing something epic and new. What it means for outside of us? I don't think about it. It just needs to be epic for us.” ♦

Visit gameinformer.com/origins for more exclusive videos and features about *Assassin's Creed Origins*, including developer interviews and more in-depth coverage on the game

A dramatic, cinematic scene from the game Destiny 2. In the foreground, three Guardians in full combat armor are silhouetted against a bright, hazy sky. They are looking up at a massive, dark, mechanical structure that resembles a giant hand or a complex machine, suspended in the air. The structure has glowing orange lights at its joints. The background shows a cityscape with smoke rising from the ground, suggesting a recent battle. The sky is filled with rain or falling debris, and there are faint, glowing orange lines in the air. The overall color palette is dark with warm, orange and yellow highlights from the sky and the structure's lights.

Destiny 2 shatters its own mold to shape a dynamic future

» **PLATFORM**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **STYLE**
Online Multiplayer
Shooter

» **PUBLISHER**
Activision

» **DEVELOPER**
Bungie

» **RELEASE**
September 8
(PS4, Xbox One),
TBA (PC)



A FRESH START

By Matt Miller

"Any time we put a number on the box, we will start fresh," says Luke Smith, game director of Destiny 2. "Every time we launch an integer, it will always be this way. We're going to change things, fundamentally, every time."

Coming from one of the voices guiding the development of Destiny 2, this statement of intent is bold, unqualified, and a sentiment that defies what we've come to expect from many of the most successful video game franchises, where committing to dramatic change is simply too risky. Nonetheless, Destiny 2 backs up the claim with a bevy of changes, improvements, and ground-up rebuilding of many aspects of gameplay and storytelling. Even with millions of devoted players waiting in the wings, Bungie is forging ahead with plans that dramatically reshape its successful universe, and aiming to do so without losing the identity that garnered success in the first place.

"We need this to be a common starting line for returning *and* new players," says project lead Mark Noseworthy, the other half of the creative leadership for Destiny 2. "We didn't want to build two games - one for players at level 40, and one for people who are brand new. It allowed us to say: What bones do we want to break? What systems should be changed, fundamentally, that we could only do if we started fresh? It meant changing things like the weapon slots, completely altering the way subclasses work, and more. It freed us up to make a better Destiny."



NO COMPROMISES

I'm sitting in on Destiny's reimagining. In a rare insight into the development process, I'm attending Bungie's weekly lead meeting for Destiny 2, where the guiding voices of design, narrative, and more gather to discuss a path forward. It's not the first time I've had the good fortune of a ringside seat to Bungie's creative process, but it's the first time I've seen and heard the developers swing their punches with such abandon. Unbound by prior constraints enforced by the architecture of Destiny 1, I overhear the team leads discuss how to roll out story in a nuanced and explorable game world, and ways to introduce new game weapon systems and subclasses to players. In multiple contexts, I hear Smith and Noseworthy insist on a no-compromises approach to Destiny 2; whether it's a system returning from the first game, or something brand new, the focus is on making sure that no one thing in the new game is just okay – everything that isn't above a threshold of consistent and elegant design is kicked to the curb.

In no place is that philosophy more apparent

than storytelling. Destiny 1 took a lot of grief for its treatment of in-game narrative, and the new approach aims to make strides forward, beginning with a clear narrative structure and theme. "It's really important to us to tell a story that is relatable," Noseworthy says. "Everyone sitting on their couch has had that experience of losing something and wanting to get it back. So this is a game about loss and recovery. What happens when you take a world full of superheroes, and then take away their power, history, and home? What lengths would they go to get it all back?" Destiny 2 opens in a time after the Guardians have had a string of triumphs, only to be suddenly laid low. In one devastating assault, the alien Cabal Red Legion destroys the Guardians' tower and all of their immaculately collected weapons and armor, overruns humanity's last city on Earth, and robs the Guardians of their power and light by capturing the Traveler. Whether you've been playing for three years or you're a newly risen Guardian, the danger and stakes are clear from the outset.

That threat is personified by a single central villain – Lord Ghoul is the head of the Cabal

empire, and his teeming army of troops dwarfs the forward Cabal scouts seen in the last game. "He's come to our system, not because he's some mustache-twirling Cobra Commander," Smith says. "Ghoul is a villain who feels passed by. Ever since he was just a little Cabal runt, he was overlooked. This guy we call the Consul took him under his wing, and convinced Ghoul that when the Traveler gifted Light to humanity that the Traveler made the wrong choice." Ghoul took control of the Cabal by force in a military coup that sent the prior Emperor, Calus, into exile. But even with that stolen power, our villain feels scorned and passed over by something far greater. "He's arrived in our system to show that humanity is weak," Smith continues. "Ghoul's attack on the City is a show of force to the Traveler, as if to say to the Traveler: 'Those people that you picked are unworthy, and I am showing you what worthy means.'"

Even as a more complex bad guy takes the stage, Bungie is also doing more to flesh out its heroic cast. The three Vanguard leaders play far more active roles. "The Vanguard all react to the loss differently," Smith says.



Individual armor pieces in Destiny 2 includes distinct stats for armor value, agility, and recovery



The familiar Tower social space from the first game has been devastated by the arrival of the Red Legion

"Zavala loses his sense of purpose – he's weakened, and he's asking the question: Without light, are we even Guardians? He's in an existential crisis. Ikora reacts totally differently. She's furious. This power she used to identify with is gone, and she's angry. And Cayde, who is this goofy merry prankster who is full of jokes, does the thing that neither of the other two did. He goes out and tries to do something heroic – and it doesn't go super great." As the plot launches beyond the City's capture, the player's job focuses on reuniting these Guardian leaders, and discovering what other secrets await in the solar system.

Along the way, and evidenced by my time exploring the new locations, the narrative is far more player-facing than before. "There is no grimoire on the website in Destiny 2," Noseworthy says. "But in no way is it our intent to get rid of deep lore in the game. We just want to put it in the game." Destinations are invested with greater world-building through the injection of both voiced characters and opportunities for narrative discovery. The result is an explorable landscape that must be played to be fully understood.

DELVING INTO ADVENTURE

As I'm listening to the leads discuss their plans for Destiny 2, my attention is split, as I'm also playing through a heretofore unseen section of Destiny 2 – the fully explorable area of the European Dead Zone, a massive forest on Earth. A new social space called the Farm affords the opportunity to meet a sniper named Devrim Kay. Interacting with him shows off a slick new conversation interface that produces greater emotion and character animation potential. Each new location includes a character like Devrim – a questgiver that helps to tell the story of the locale, and make each destination take on increased narrative weight.

That narrative weight and the tasks that characters like Devrim assign are communicated through Adventures. "If a campaign mission is about finding out what happens next in the story, the Adventures are about finding out more about the characters and locations in the world," Smith says. I venture into the European Dead Zone on some of these Adventures – the story details remain a closely guarded secret, but the tone is clear. These crafted experiences send

me to distinct areas on the map and inevitably into a pitched battle, and new lore flows naturally through the experience.

Destinations also take on added dimension through Lost Sectors. "Lost sectors are basically like findable dungeons in the world, with cool bosses at the end, with a key that opens a treasure chest," Smith says. During my wandering, I spot several unusual icons scrawled on walls and objects, each one indicating that a Lost Sector is nearby. In Destiny 1, I might have found a well-hidden but tiny cave with a minor treasure chest inside. In Destiny 2, that cave entrance could lead to a large underground sprawl, where I fight a horde of nested Fallen before confronting their Captain in single combat. And in between my discoveries, I can see public events pop up on my in-game map (summonable with the touch of a button) and know exactly when and where they will spawn, encouraging intentional grouping into high-octane fights. Newly reinvigorated public events, Adventures, and Lost Sectors join old familiar activities like patrols, scannable objects, and collectible materials, all as emergent experiences that can be tackled without ever departing to orbit.

When I'm ready for new vistas, I can head to three additional major locations beyond the European Dead Zone, also without the need to enter orbit in between. "We're going to all-new worlds. You're not returning to Mars," Noseworthy says. Titan is a moon of Saturn, dominated by an endless methane ocean, but with ancient arcologies from humanity's golden age slowly sinking into the depths. "Titan has an interesting juxtaposition of experiences," Noseworthy says. "When you land, you're essentially on top of tanks and shipping containers floating on the ocean, and then pretty quickly you enter the arcologies, and drill deeper and deeper toward the center of the planet through these tight tunnels. That's where it gets really claustrophobic." Alternately, you can head to Jupiter's moon of Io, the last place where the

Traveler set down prior to coming to Earth. Finally, you can visit the planetoid of Nessus, where the Vex have transformed the land from the inside out for their inscrutable purposes, and a lost Earth colony ship called Exodus Black crashed hundreds of years earlier.

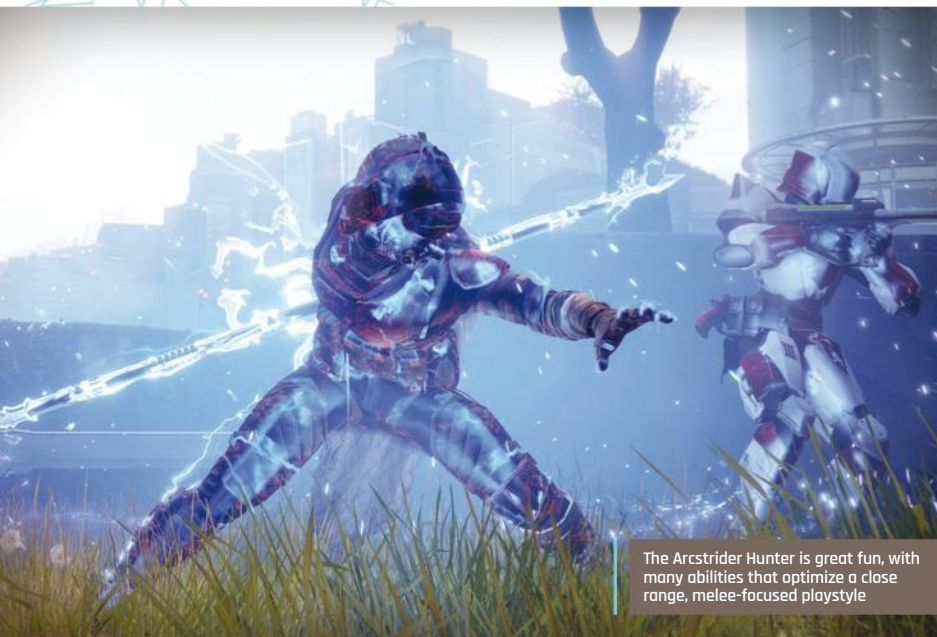
No matter your choice of destination, the Director – the solar map and guide from which you choose your next engagement – has been redesigned. The quest log and several related systems have been eliminated, and the Director streamlined to strip away the hard-to-decipher clog of icons. "We want to make it clear to players what they could be doing every night," Smith says. "What are their options when they log in? It's able to guide you to different experiences. We think of this as unshiding the fun."

PRESSING RESET

A first glance at your Guardian's character screen in Destiny 2 might suggest that little has changed. That impression is wrong. Even a cursory examination reveals that one of the core features of gameplay has seen an overhaul. The three main weapon classes – primary, special, and heavy – are no more. In their place, three new categories redefine the way players will confront battle. The majority of weapon types, including the new submachine guns, pulse rifles, auto rifles, scout rifles, hand cannons, and sidearms, can now appear in either of the first two categories, called kinetic (standard ammunition) and energy (arc, solar, and void-powered shots). Deadlier weapons – the new grenade launchers, sniper rifles, shotguns, rocket launchers, and fusion rifles (heavy machine guns have been faded out) – have moved down into a third slot, called power weapons. "We made this change for a ton of reasons," Smith says. "One of those reasons was to give players more flexibility with their arsenal. If someone loves hand cannons, they can run two of them. We also wanted to encourage more weapon switching. And we wanted to get the one-hit kills sorted out in PvP." Only power weapons (and supers) now provide a reliable way to take down an opposing Guardian in a single shot.

After several hours of playing various sections of Destiny 2, the change for a veteran player is even more dramatic than it might at first seem. At one point, running a kinetic sidearm and a solar hand cannon, I'm a close-range specialist. Without the guaranteed ammo for my sniper rifle, another section sees me relying on a solar energy scout rifle to drop a Major's shield. And individual encounters seem more tuned to demand that I use all the weapons at my disposal, rather than fall into a routine of a single reliable standby gun.

Your character screen might also imply subclasses have remained untouched, but look closer, and the entire system has been shuffled and redesigned. Every subclass is organized around a super. Above and below that super, options for grenades and movement mode jumps return. To the right, one of two distinct paths, each encompassing four abilities, allows for smart customization. While you can unlock abilities on both avenues, only one path can be selected at any given time. "The thing we were trying to do there is make it easier for people to get to a place where they're playing the game optimally," Noseworthy says. Off to the left of your super, a new class-specific ability appears, always with two variations. Warlocks command either a healing rift for themselves and their allies or an empowering rift that boosts damage. Titans get a choice between a large blocking barrier or a smaller barrier that reloads equipped weapons when taking cover behind it. And Hunters gain the choice between a dodge that recharges melee or one that instantly reloads their gun. Taken together, these new subclasses still allow for customization, but also encourage even casual players to pursue playstyles that have natural and obvious paths to success.



The Arcstrider Hunter is great fun, with many abilities that optimize a close range, melee-focused playstyle

SURPRISING SUBCLASSES



GUNSLINGER



ARCSTRIDER



STRIKER



DAWNBLADE

Each of Destiny's three main classes, Hunter, Titan, and Warlock, receive one entirely new subclass in Destiny 2. But even returning subclasses from the previous game have been wholly redesigned, and players should expect big surprises throughout the leveling process.

Warlocks now connect to the Solar power source as the Dawnblade. "She summons a fiery sword and wings and can float and rains down fiery terror on her opponents," says project lead Mark Noseworthy. "She can quickly drop to the ground and slam her sword into the ground and blow back enemies." In all the ways that matter, the Warlock becomes an avenging angel with profound aerial superiority. Hunters take up the acrobatic style of the Arcstrider, a tumbling close-quarters killer with a

lightning staff in hand, resembling a kung fu master or meditative monk who dashes through and around foes. And the Titan adopts the void power of the Sentinel - a gatecrasher who blocks, slams, and flings his signature circular shield in an unmistakable homage to a certain Marvel comic book hero.

Lest players presume that returning subclasses might feel overly familiar, my time playing two old favorites dispels the notion. The Titan Striker has a host of new abilities, including a roaming super that mixes his signature slam with opportunities for devastating charges. And Hunter Gunslingers can look forward to tons of fun new tricks, including a golden gun super that can fire up to six shots.



The competitive Countdown match type requires the team on offense to detonate a bomb on one of two locations

A NEW COMPETITION

For many players, the heart of Destiny is the fierce heat of competitive play. Those players should prepare themselves for some big changes; after multiple Crucible matches, I came away surprised by the breadth of reinvention. Every match type is now a 4v4 experience, and playlists have been streamlined. “PvP is sorted into two playlists now,” Smith says. “Quickplay is the place where you’re going to find more party games – Control, Clash, Supremacy. Beer and peanuts is how we sometimes talk about it. I’m home from a long day, and I want to shoot and loot against other players. Meanwhile, Competitive play has two modes – one we’re not talking about right now, and the other is Countdown. These are objective modes. It requires a light dusting of cooperation. It’s more structured.”

Playthroughs of Countdown with Bungie’s PvP team are fast-paced and raucous. The team on offense must choose one of two locations to set a bomb, and hold it against the defending team, or skip the objective and simply kill off the whole enemy team. Each round flips team roles until someone hits six wins.

Moment-to-moment action feels different. One-on-one engagements are extended; sticky grenades no longer one-shot, and melees take three hits for a kill. Energy weapons do additional damage to Guardians who are currently deploying their super. Power ammo for shotguns, sniper rifles, or grenade launchers (among others) can be gathered by only

one player when it spawns. Smart groups synthesize their class abilities to create hard points of barriers and rifts. With only four players on a team, supers absolutely turn the tide of a round.

Equally important, the U.I. and audio is organized to offer clearer messaging. The top of the screen shows each player’s subclass, and the status of their super, as well as when a super activates. Collect power ammo, and a

message clearly shows your name and what weapon type you just loaded for all players to see. Unique sounds distinguish ally and enemy super activations. The combined effect is one in which savvy players can better understand what’s happening in any moment of the match, and respond accordingly. “We believe we’ve made a PvP offering in Destiny 2 that is more readable, more watchable, and more competitive,” Smith says.



THE NEW EXOTICS

The exotic weapon system is returning, and I was fortunate to play with three of the new arrivals. Each offers its own unique shooting experience, and left me eager to collect them with my actual Guardian come September. "Our approach to exotics is to build a weapon that embodies a specific player experience or power fantasy, and then have that fantasy communicated through almost every aspect of the weapon: gameplay, audio, art, visual effects, animation, fiction, everything," explains senior gameplay designer Jon Weisnewski. Here are some of his thoughts about each of the new arrivals, which are just a sampling of the new exotic arsenal.



SUNSHOT (PICTURED)

"Sunshot is a solar hand cannon that shoots pieces of the sun. The player experience here is pretty primal: it feels awesome to shoot something and watch it blow up. When it hits, the projectile detonates and lights up the enemy with a hot glow, and when it kills the target explodes. It's great for chaining damage across multiple enemies and crowd management. The magazine is a small metal chamber with exhaust vents. As the player fires they'll see it glow with heat and release hot gasses and flames. There's a star chart design etched into the weapon as a reminder to the guardian wielding it that someone had to travel a great distance to bring the gun into their hands."

RISKRUNNER

"Riskrunner is an arc submachine gun that channels electric energy from its surroundings and uses it to hyper-charge the weapon for a brief period. Specifically, in order to activate the weapon's true potential the user must take arc damage from a hostile source, and then continue taking arc damage as an upkeep cost. It's a risk/reward mechanic that tempts

players into over-committing and riding a line between recklessness and glory. The front of the gun has three lightning rods that grab incoming arc damage and channel it into a series of batteries on the back of the gun. Once charged, the batteries light up and the gun comes to life in the player's hands. All weapon stats get a boost and the projectiles spark a chain lightning effect on clustered enemies."

SWEET BUSINESS

"Sweet Business is a kinetic auto rifle that personifies the action movie machine gunner fantasy. A handheld Gatling gun that spins up and spews a geyser of bullets. As the weapon spins up, its range and stability improve, and any ammo box that the player picks up while in this state is automatically added to the magazine. The longer the player fires, the hotter the barrels will glow. A simple finger-pulled trigger didn't quite deliver on the emotional level we wanted for this gun, so we made a custom hand, pulled lever for the firing mechanic. Seeing the hand crank pull back as the weapon roars to life really delivers the lead-in-the-air fire-and-forget gunner fantasy."



The Inverted Spire strike sees Guardians descend into a Vex planetoid that is currently under assault by the Red Legion



ORGANIZING PRINCIPLES

Destiny 1 invited a community into its world, and the developers at Bungie are the first to sing the praises of those dedicated fans as the real mark of the game's success. But both players and developers share the sentiment that the grouping and community systems need to grow. Destiny 2 takes many of the organizing elements that were only available to its most devoted community members on external sites, and pushes playing with others, making friends, and sharing in communal progression a core in-game experience.

Clans have existed since Destiny's earliest days, but you'd be hard-pressed to know how and why they had any value, beyond an extra title on the emblem beneath your name. Even then, clan engagement and invitations could only be completed outside of the game. Destiny 2's clans can be managed within the game, and provide ample reasons for engagement. "One screen over from your character screen is your clan page," Noseworthy says. "That's going to show you who is in your clan, but also its status. You have a clan banner. You have a motto. There's progression and rewards for your clan. We're trying to slope the floor to get everybody to be a part of a clan." Rather than making clans a place for only hardcore players, Bungie has adopted a system that echoes the factions of Destiny 1; players pledge to a clan, and the things you do in the game contribute to that clan's success – and everyone gets rewards for membership and engagement. Whether you're part of a dedicated raid team, a PvP lone wolf, or a casual story and strike player, your deeds and activities help your clan excel.

The centrality of clans is reinforced through a brand new grouping system called guided games. Traditional matchmaking still exists for activities like quick PvP matches or strikes. But for those game types that demand greater commitment and communication, guided games offer an in-game alternative to looking-for-group websites. "It's really important that you're able to play every piece of content that

we build,” Smith says. “Guided games let players confront challenging content like nightfalls, Trials, and raids.” One or more members of a clan can register for an activity as “guides,” while other individual players or groups can find those guides and join them as “seekers.” Seekers can see the clan they might play with, and get a sense of whether the expressed play style in that clan’s description is a good fit. If the system works, every player will have an easy way to find groups and confront even Destiny 2’s most complex and involved activities.

Bungie’s growing focus on community engagement is reminiscent of another developer’s fervent efforts. Blizzard is another gamemaker that has built its reputation on direct engagement with its players, and the fostering of teamwork and relationships. In keeping with that shared tradition, Destiny 2 on PC will be the first non-Blizzard game to show up on the Blizzard desktop app. “We are going to be welcoming the Blizzard community into the Destiny universe,” Smith says. “There’s that common ground. We’re trying to build an amazing audience and community with Destiny, and that’s true of every game that Blizzard does.” Blizzard’s devoted players and international reach have profound implications for Destiny’s entry into the PC market, joining an already robust community of players on console.

MAINTAINING THE MYSTERY

Bungie pulled back the curtain on Destiny 2 at a reveal event in May, leaving its community plenty to mull over. An opening mission saw the devastation of the Guardian’s home tower. An exciting cooperative strike took players into the heart of a Cabal drilling operation on the Vex-controlled Nessus. And competitive Countdown battles on the new Midtown map finally gave players a ground view of the fabled Last City.

Nonetheless, Bungie has remained quiet on some important issues. What is the new progression and investment experience? How will the new highly competitive Trials mode work? In what ways will Bungie address the collection and vault space challenges that plagued its prior game? How will Bungie speak to and reward returning veteran players after three years of dedicated play? Are raids changing? And will Destiny 2 avoid content droughts post-release? While some of these and other questions are sure to be answered before September 8, it’s clear Bungie hopes to keep at least some of Destiny 2 shrouded for discovery until the game is in players’ hands.

Even with big changes on the horizon, my time with Destiny 2 reinforces an identity that persists into the sequel, a conscious focus on humanity’s resilience, potential, and ambition, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. It’s a theme that resonates even as gameplay modes, weapon types, and other changes swirl through various evolutions. “We’ve already been pushed to the brink,” Noseworthy says. “And now Armageddon has happened, and we’re being pushed right up against extinction. But even in that, there’s aspiration. There’s a version of Destiny that you can imagine as very dark and terrible, with burning trash cans everywhere. But instead, the way we design the environments, the storylines, and the characters, we’re trying to keep hope at the center.” ♦



Darksiders III

A dark horse rises from the ashes

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
THQ Nordic

» **Developer**
Gunfire Games

» **Release**
2018

Critics praised the first two Darksiders games for their gorgeous, comic-inspired art and their winning Zelda-inspired gameplay. Unfortunately, all the inspiration in the world couldn't keep the original THQ afloat, and when the publisher shuttered in 2013, fans feared they had seen the last of this colorful interpretation of the apocalypse.

Following the closure, THQ Nordic (formerly Nordic Games) snatched up the property, and began looking for a group of developers who could carry on the Darksiders legacy. It didn't have to look far. Darksiders' original developer, Vigil Games, had closed alongside THQ, but a sizable portion of the team formed its own studio, Gunfire Games, and began work on VR experiences like Herobound: Spirit Champion and Chronos. THQ Nordic asked Gunfire Games to develop the HD remake of Darksiders II – but that was just a stepping stone to Darksiders III.

"At Vigil, we didn't really have a plan [for Darksiders III]," says president of Gunfire Games David Adams. "After Darksiders II, we were told that we weren't going to do another

Darksiders. So, when we came back to it, we figured, 'Okay, we're not going to do the four-player co-op thing, because that's just too big in scope.' Plus, it felt like we had told the story of War and Death, so it would be cool to tell the story of one of the other horsemen. It seemed obvious to us that it should be Fury. I don't think we even considered doing Strife."

In the Darksiders' universe, Fury is the only female "Horseman" of The Apocalypse. She wields a bladed whip in combat, so her movements are very fast and fluid. She's much faster than her brother War, but not nearly as nimble as Death, a difference which Gunfire hopes provides a nice balance to the combat.

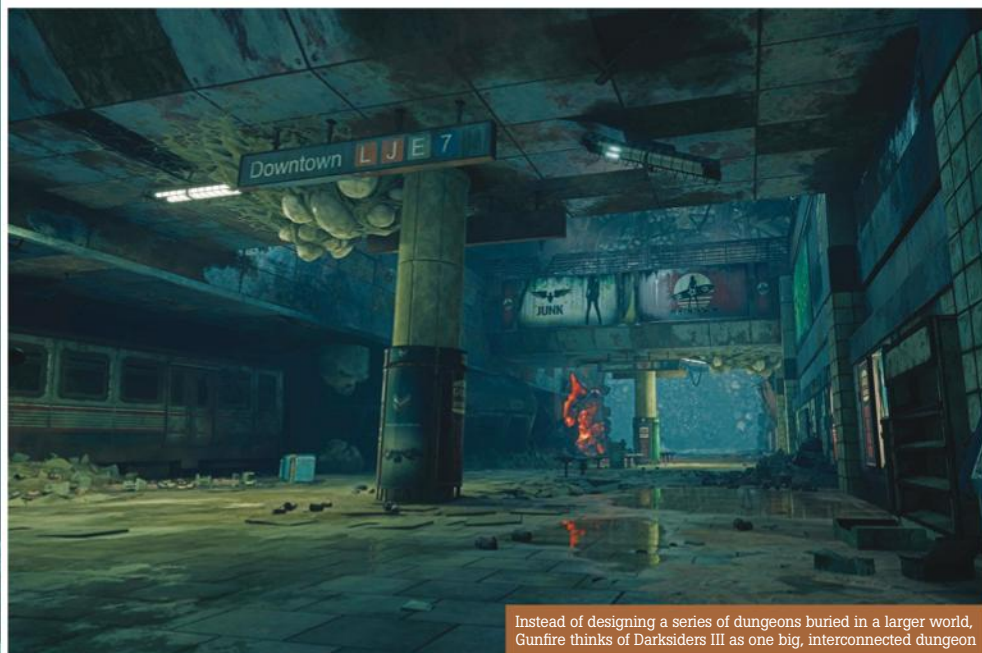
However, Fury's whip is not her only means of attack. Gunfire thinks of Fury like a mage, so she has a series of magical attacks at her disposal. The studio isn't ready to talk about these magical talents just yet, but it sounds like Fury slowly acquires new powers throughout the game, much like War and Death acquired new weapons and gear. Fury can use this magic to augment her attacks in combat, but these skills also grant her access to new

areas of the world à la Metroid.

Gunfire's approach to Darksiders III's world is a bit different than its predecessors. Previous games relied heavily on the classic Zelda model, where players entered a "dungeon," acquired a new tool or ability, and then solved a series of puzzle challenges designed around that tool. However, the developers feel like they rarely took advantage of those tools outside of the area in which they were acquired.

"This game is different," Adams says. "The way the world is structured, we call it one giant, mega dungeon. Where the other games were more hub and spoke design, in this game, the whole world is structured like a giant dungeon, so you're kind of weaving in and out of different areas. Fury still has a horse, but the needs of that horse are much different than in previous games."

Darksiders III follows Fury's actions throughout the events of the second Darksiders game. While Death is searching for evidence to disprove his brother's war crimes, Fury is cleaning up the mess created when the apocalypse came early. Due to the events of the first Darksider's game,

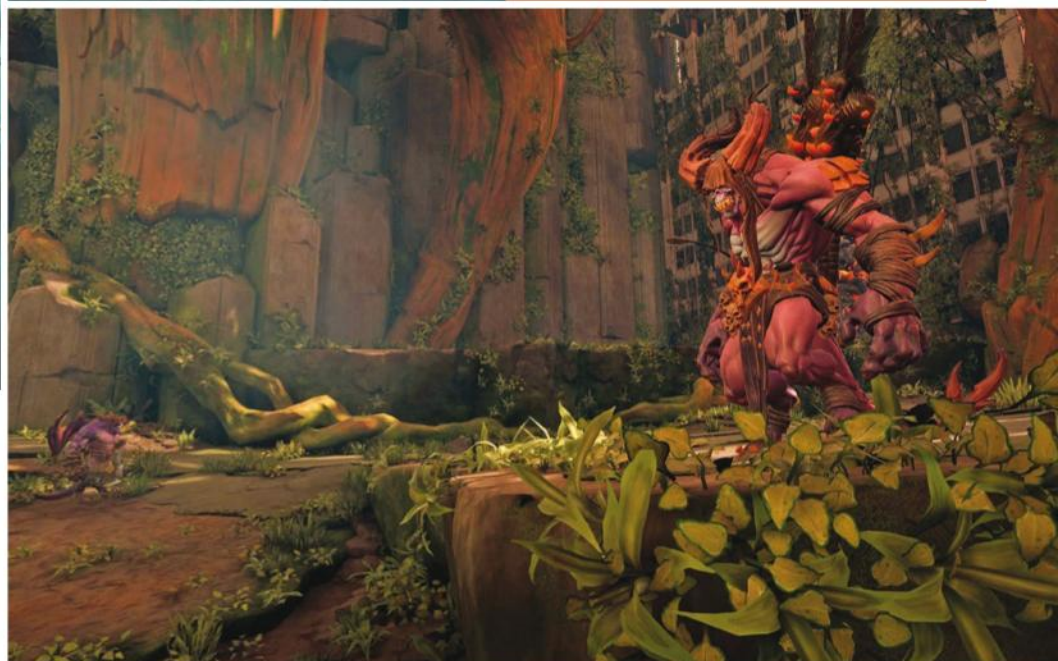


Instead of designing a series of dungeons buried in a larger world, Gunfire thinks of Darksiders III as one big, interconnected dungeon

the physical incarnations of the Seven Deadly Sins have been unleashed onto the world to cause havoc. Last time this occurred, all four Horseman had to work together to bring the Sins to justice. This time, Fury must work alone to defeat all seven of the Deadly Sins and restore balance to the world.

"Every Sin in the game has its own region within the mega dungeon, and those regions are reflections of our interpretation of that sin," Adams says. "In this game, the Seven Deadly Sins are not primordial evils that are going to doom human souls to eternal hell, they are super powerful, comic book-like villains. Sloth is a bug. He's an insect who lives underground, and he has these weird rock crab guys who carry him around on a throne because he's super, ridiculously lazy."

Even though Darksiders III takes place during the timeframe of the first two games, Gunfire Games believes it will shed new light into the larger Darksiders' story, and that is important to the studio. To Adams, Darksiders felt like unfinished business, and the team feels incredibly lucky to be working on a game they believed they'd never touch again. » **Ben Reeves**



Lego Marvel Super Heroes 2

The Guardians take center stage

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» **Style**
2-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Warner Brothers
Interactive

» **Developer**
TT Games

» **Release**
November 14

The original Lego Marvel Super Heroes earned praise for striking a balance between giving oodles of fan service for hardcore Marvel enthusiasts and creating a fun action-puzzler that anyone could get into. The sequel looks to double down on that, offering a bigger cast of characters that brings in more fan favorites like Spider-Gwen, while introducing a brand-new story that puts The Guardians Of The Galaxy as the central group instead of The Avengers (though the Avengers still play a part in the game).

We recently played through the first level of the game, which plays out parallel to the ending of the original game. The Guardians find themselves fighting Kang The Conqueror, a time-traveling villain, and turning to Earth's superheroes for assistance. The opening takes place on Xandar, with the Nova Corps evacuating the city while the Guardians fight against a sentinel controlled by Kang. Gameplay follows the same formula as the first, with players controlling characters as they progress through a story and semi-open world, solving puzzles with hero abilities and unlocking characters. Every character has specific abilities they can use, like Starlord's gravity grenades and turning his mask on and off. Characters also have unique emotes that can affect gameplay. For example,

Starlord can turn on his Walkman and make enemies in the surrounding area dance to music, while Spider-Gwen can take selfies that can then be uploaded online.

The first level, taking place on both the Guardians' ship and the streets of Xandar, was entertaining if a bit chaotic. A lot of characters were onscreen during battle sequences and it was often hard to figure out exactly which one I needed to switch to and what they should be doing to progress through a fight. Moving around was also a bit clumsy, especially when it came to flying as Starlord. Ultimately, it was a fun experience once the

confusion passed.

The sneak peek at Lego Marvel Super Heroes 2 suggests fans of the original game's focus on filling its world with as many Marvel characters as possible will be pleased. However, we didn't get a sense of the open-world gameplay or how characters are unlocked during our time with this early version. Will we just be exploring a city? Various cities? Planets in the Marvel comics? There are a lot of unanswered questions, but for now TT Games seems rightly focused on what fans of both the Marvel universe and the previous entry want more of.

» **Javy Gwaltney**



**IF YOU DON'T LIKE
THE MESSAGE,
EAT THE MESSENGER.**



HUNGER BARS ARE BACK



Far Cry 5

Ubisoft takes on faith, firearms, and freedom

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Shooter
(Online TBA)

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ubisoft Montreal

» **Release**
February 27

Far Cry has made its name on transporting players to exotic locales, giving them access to a load of weaponry, and then sending them to wage war against despots, tyrants, and madmen. With the fifth entry in one of its biggest series, Ubisoft is making a bold maneuver by taking the player somewhere a little less romantic: Big Sky Country. Set in the fictional Hope County, Montana, Far Cry 5 follows the protagonist's attempts to take down a religious cult terrorizing the locales.

While the brief snippets of run-and-gun gameplay we watched suggest there's nothing radically different about how this entry plays compared to previous titles, the tone of Far Cry 5 is much bleaker than the third and fourth entries, which were already fixated on the madness of men in power and featured graphic violence. According to producer Dan Hay, the new game is inspired by both chaotic international political conditions as well as the 2016 occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, in which armed militants took residence

in the Oregon-based national park for 40 days. What we saw of the game and its characters suggest this might end up being the most disturbing Far Cry yet.

The cultists are led by a hyper-religious family of four whose fundamental pillar of belief is "being prepared to be tested." Hay says Ubisoft consulted with a team of cult experts to build these characters and that each corresponds to a role that most cults in the world rely on. Joseph is the leader, charismatic and filled with spiritual energy, while Jacob is the muscle and John is the smooth-talking lawyer who handles the business side of things. Faith, the sole woman of the group, is also charismatic but deceptively soothing, serving as the family's primary recruiter. Given the cultists' preparation doctrine, it's no surprise the small army they lead is armed to the teeth with assault rifles, shotguns, and other firearms capable of tearing you to shreds. Luckily, you have the means to fight back, and you aren't doing so alone.

We don't know much about the protagonist, outside that they are a junior deputy on the police force in Hope County and you can pick their gender and ethnicity. However, we saw at least three allies helping out the yet-to-be-named protagonist and got a sense of their motivations. Jerome is a shotgun-toting pastor who's tired of the cultists leading his flock away. The mechanic Nick Rye fears for the safety of his family and is willing to take the fight to the air with his minigun-equipped biplanes. Mary May, who appears to be a bartender, wants to get revenge on the cultists for stealing her family away and she will, one Molotov cocktail at a time.

While Ubisoft's presentation geared heavily toward discussing Far Cry 5's inspirations, settings, and story tidbits, we did see about 20 seconds of gameplay. What we witnessed was in line with previous games, with a few new elements. Gunplay took center stage, with the protagonist blasting cultists away with assault rifles and shotguns. Melee weapons and animal companions make the jump from Far Cry Primal into 5. We saw the protagonist kill one enemy by hurling a pitchfork at him spear-style, and then beat another one's head in with a sledgehammer. The protagonist also befriended a dog at one point and commanded the canine to attack an enemy. The dog not only assaulted the foe, but stole his AK-47 and brought it back to the player.

While previous games featured helicopters and wingsuits, Far Cry 5 is the first one to let us use planes. Ubisoft didn't specify how and when they would be used, but we saw gameplay footage of the player in control of a biplane armed with miniguns and using it to rain hell down on a compound filled with cultists. For those who loved Far Cry 4's co-op functionality, good news: you can play through the entirety of 5 by yourself or with a partner, according to Ubisoft.

While our sneak peek of Far Cry 5 offered few details, it's enough to know Ubisoft is trying something thematically different with its fifth numbered entry, trading in globe-trotting thrills for a more homegrown terror. We're curious to see what details trickle out in the months to come, but for now, we're looking forward to this new direction and seeing how it fits inside the series' tried and true open-world shooter formula. » **Javy Gwaltney**



Final Fantasy XII: The Zodiac Age

Improving a familiar fantasy

Final Fantasy fans love comparing installments and debating their faults and merits, but one entry has proven especially divisive over the last decade. Final Fantasy XII first released in 2006 on PS2, and its drastic departure from series conventions has drawn both praise and complaints in the years since. If you haven't enjoyed (or haven't played) the game before, keep an open mind for Final Fantasy XII: The Zodiac Age, because this enhanced remaster makes it much easier to appreciate the best parts of the experience.

I spent several hours playing The Zodiac Age, comparing my memories of the game with its new reality. The biggest and best change is how character progression works. Instead of everyone buying abilities on one large grid (called the license board), characters now pick specific jobs with individual license boards tailored to that job's role. For example, to make Fran an archer, you no longer need to blindly hunt for skills and weapons on a single, overwhelming license board. Instead, you assign her the archer job, and you can rest assured she will get the relevant abilities from spending her points on that specialized board.

Characters can eventually have two jobs, and those jobs are locked in once chosen. This approach gives players less flexibility, but leads to more specialized combat dynamics. With varied roles like knight, time battlemage, and machinist being held by different characters, I had more incentive to swap



party members in and out based on the encounters.

The basic structure of combat remains interesting and fun. Battles play out in real time, and you set up conditions and commands that govern ally behavior without direct input. The goal is to optimize your party's automatic actions, but you can still issue direct orders when needed. That's all the same as before, but one smart change to combat is a separate meter for Quickening moves, Final Fantasy XII's version of Limit Breaks. These powerful abilities required huge chunks of MP before, but they now charge up independently, freeing up your resources for other strategies.

Beyond the expected visual and performance upgrades, The Zodiac Age has various other adjustments

and tweaks. A high-speed option allows you to traverse the large environments faster, and a standalone Trial Mode lets you tackle a gauntlet of encounters that gradually increase in difficulty. Square Enix also implemented an auto-save function, making the treks between save crystals a bit more comfortable.

Most of these improvements were previously implemented in a re-released international version of Final Fantasy XII, but since that never made it to North America, the standout features will seem new to most players. By clearing away some clutter to let the clever battle mechanics and fantastic cast shine, The Zodiac Age has the potential to make Final Fantasy XII less contentious among RPG fans.

» **Joe Juba**

» **Platform**
PS4

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Square Enix

» **Developer**
Square Enix

» **Release**
July 11



Bloodstained: Ritual Of The Night

An old haunting ground with new tricks

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
505 Games

» **Developer**
Inti Creates

» **Release**
Early 2018



Attempts to return to classic gaming formulas under new monikers have been hit or miss in recent months. For every successful revival like *Torment: Tides of Numenera*, we get a trainwreck like *Mighty No. 9*. *Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night* is longtime Castlevania producer Koji Igarashi's shot at the retro revival, and after playing a brief demo of the game, I'm excited to see more.

If you've played any 2D Castlevania title like *Symphony of the Night*, *Bloodstained*'s gothic castle and organ chimes should look and sound familiar, and the controls follow suit. The movement speed is about the same, you can perform a backward dash from standing position (though you can't abuse it to move more quickly across the map), and jumps feel appropriately

floaty. *Bloodstained* also implements a few of its inspirations' finer details. For example, if you throw out an aerial attack right before landing, you can immediately follow up with a second attack right after you hit the ground.

As I explored the small area included in the demo, I found several different weapons and pieces of armor to play with, all of them mapping neatly to Castlevania's rapiers, claymores, knives, and close-range weapons (though instead of brass knuckles, you can find "Kung-Fu Boots"). The whip, however, looks and feels a bit different from Castlevania's iconic melee weapon. You can also look forward to filling out a blue-on-white map, with plenty of items stowed away in chests and hidden in secret compartments along the walls.

Bloodstained also makes some significant changes to the Castlevania formula. Hearts that would drop from candlesticks and such are gone, replaced by a mana meter that refills over time. You can use mana to cast spells learned from fighting monsters (in my demo, I learned to throw bones and toss javelins by killing monsters who did the same), along with more unique spells mapped to the right trigger, such as a short-range fireball you aim with the right analog stick. Some monsters also provide passive bonuses, like increased movement speed. All of these changes made me feel like I had numerous options to deal with different situations and enemies. If nothing else, I could more easily deal with *Bloodstained*'s equivalent of flying Medusa Heads.

My demo ended with a boss encounter against an umbrella-wielding enemy clad in a red dress, which depleted most of my health-potion reserves and had me using all the combat tricks, spells, and weapons I'd acquired up to that point. The fight was tough but fun, and definitely elicited the feeling I had when I first fought Galamoth and Gaibon in *Symphony of the Night*. The demo didn't provide a sense of how long-term exploration will fare (are there save or teleport rooms? How much backtracking is involved?), but what I've played makes me a bit more confident Igarashi's return to a classic formula won't disappoint.

» **Suriel Vazquez**



Indivisible

Divide and conquer

Nothing under the sun may be new, but a lot of indie developers have found ways to remix classic game ideas into products that feel exciting and fresh. Case in point is *Indivisible*, a stunning game full of hand-drawn animation from the original core team behind the cult-hit fighting game *Skullgirls*. After raising over \$2 million via the crowdsourcing platform Indiegogo, developer Lab Zero Games aims to combine the 2D platforming/exploration elements popularized by *Metroid* with an RPG combat system reminiscent of *Valkyrie Profile*. The result is a game full of old ideas that feels new.

Indivisible's adventure begins with a spunky young girl named Ajna who was raised by her grandfather in the rural outskirts of a world based on Southeast Asian mythology. Ajna's life

is kicked into a whirlwind when a local warlord attacks her town and sends Ajna on a globe-spanning quest that forces her to confront her history as she discovers some startling revelations about her own nature.

One of Ajna's first big revelations comes during the beginning of the game, when she learns she has the ability to absorb other beings into herself. A variety of unique creatures are scattered about the world, and when Ajna touches these friendly beings (known as Incarnations) she gains their powers and abilities.

For example, an Incarnation that boosts Ajna's martial arts abilities also allow her to wall jump. We used this ability to climb up vertical shafts. Another Incarnation grants Ajna the ability to materialize a war axe from thin air, which she can use to chop down

environmental obstacles. We were also able to use this weapon like a climbing axe, digging the blade into the sides of rock walls for extra leverage.

Indivisible's exotic 2D landscape is teeming with less friendly incarnations, however, and we encounter several monsters during our exploration of the game's opening hours. As soon as Ajna physically attacks a monster, *Indivisible* transitions into an active-timed RPG battle system. At this point, up to three Incarnations jump out of Ajna and join her on the battlefield. These battles take place in real time, and each character slowly charges up their attack. You can bank a couple attacks for each character and use them all at once, creating combo strings between characters. This combat system is simple, but effective, and the action is fast and furious.

As characters level up, they gain a wider range of attack options. Similar to *Valkyrie Profile*, Ajna and her various Incarnations are tied to different face buttons, so tapping any one of those four buttons causes the corresponding character to attack. Additionally, holding down a direction on the d-pad during an attack modifies that character's action. For example, holding up on the d-pad and pressing an attack button might make a character perform an uppercut, but pressing down and attack allows that character to perform a weaker, multi-enemy attack.

Lab Zero's creative concepts and gorgeous hand-drawn animations won us over after only a few minutes. Lab Zero hopes to polish the game up more before its 2018 debut, but *Indivisible* is already shining bright on our release calendar. » **Ben Reeves**

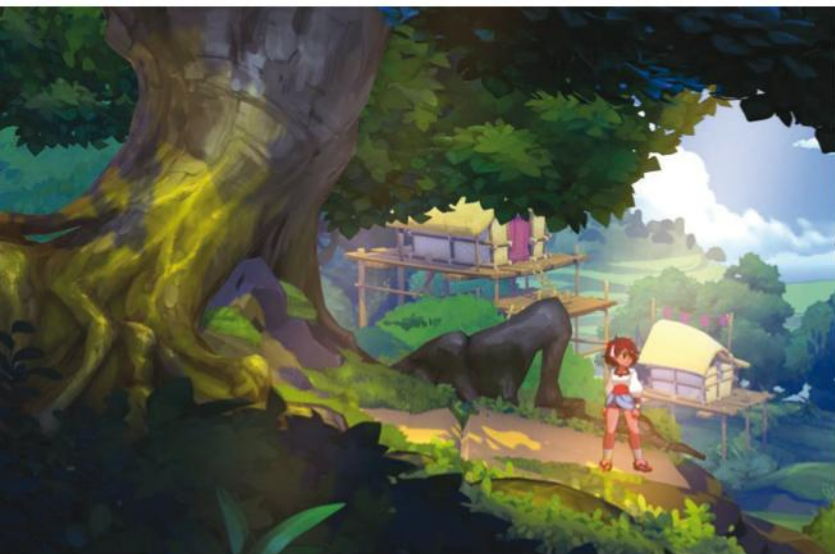
» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC • Mac

» **Style**
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
505 Games

» **Developer**
Lab Zero Games

» **Release**
2018



Combat is based off the turn-based action in *Valkyrie Profile* where each character is assigned to a different face button



Dreadnought

Massing your space fleet

» **Platform**
PS4 • PC

» **Style**
16-Player Online Action

» **Publisher**
Grey Box

» **Developer**
Yager

» **Release**
2017

On the surface, it might be easy to label Dreadnought as a sort of World of Tanks in space – you unlock massive vessels, queue up for 8v8 battles, collect rewards, and purchase new ships in a satisfying reward loop. But it has a lot more going on beyond the hangar, whether you want to play as a fragile artillery ship that can lay down destruction from afar, a heavily armored destroyer, or the titular dreadnought, slow but packing plenty of firepower.

When picking your craft you need to look at the makeup of the rest of your team, and then select something with the right shields, range, and skills to fit the task. Your personal hangar isn't just a place to upgrade and purchase new ships – you can also research new skills like anti-missile lasers, turrets, cloaking, torpedoes, and more, then plug them into your available ability slots, further customizing the ship to your taste and style.

Dreadnought's class-based ship archetypes and customization make it more interesting than its obvious inspirations. At first, maneuvering a massive starship may feel unwieldy and awkward – controlling a giant mass is much different than maneuvering or jetpacking around a small corner. The first few games impress

with a sense of scale, and the games after that are all about mastering your strategy and auxiliary weapons. While missiles are easy to aim and understand, other skills like warp boosters or maneuverability tactics take more time to master, especially in the context of team-based warfare.

Console players get a neat perk that PC players don't in the form of a co-op experience. Havoc is a PS4-exclusive mode that pits three players against waves and waves of A.I. opponents, the Scavs. These enemies have their

own unique ships, and unlike the normal method of hangar progression, players select their ship at the beginning of the match and upgrade it over time. If you're tired of facing off with other players and want to push your ships and skills to the limit with a few good friends, this is the mode for you.

I'm eager to see how Dreadnought fares when it launches later this year, as it's unlike any other space combat game I've played. Dreadnought is free-to-play and you can dive into the open beta right now. » **Daniel Tack**



Every ship archetype is special, and you can tweak them with even more options

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Arms

The long-distance boxer

» **Platform**
Switch

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Fighting

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Nintendo

» **Release**
June 16



When Nintendo revealed the Switch earlier this year, we had a chance to play Arms and walked away underwhelmed. New properties from Nintendo are always exciting, and Arms' vibrant art style is a memorable one, but playing the game made us recall the Wii's early simple boxing games. We recently spent significantly more time with Arms and checked out its additional modes. After getting a firmer understanding of its mechanics and playing with its many characters, we're much more excited about the prospect of the Switch's long-distance boxer.

For this hands-on, Nintendo offered some tips and training before letting us spend a few hours with the full game. Arms is a boxing experience, but broad quick punches are a fast way to defeat. To play you hold the two Joy-Cons in your hands like a pair of lighters, resting your thumbs on the shoulder buttons. The left shoulder button is a dash, the right button is a jump, and you lean the controllers in the direction you want to move. Instead of throwing a full punch to fire off your arms, I had much more success with small movements. If you can visualize the act of quickly pushing forward on an arcade joystick, that's what I was doing to throw punches.

After getting the basic flow of the fight down, I had much more success (and fun) playing as a reactive boxer, moving, dashing, and jumping often, going for grabs when I saw openings,



and carefully throwing out punches one arm at a time. It's a slower-paced fighter than I expected. Every character has a suggested set of arms to choose from, but you can change between them every round if you desire. Some arms split apart into three different small fists in a vertical row, great for fighting against opponents who like to jump. Others come in from the side, or pause mid-punch to fire lasers.

I also played the non-standard one-versus-one fighting modes. Hoops places two opponents on a basketball court. If you pull off a grab, you throw or dunk your opponent into the enlarged hoop. Just like normal basketball, the further you are from the hoop the more points you get. You can still throw punches and block to avoid being grabbed. Skillshot has you and an opponent fighting over a series of

targets to see who can hit the most.

You can still grab and punch your opponent to keep them from hitting targets, which leads to quick decisions about whether you should go for that target, or hit the other player hard enough so they don't. Finally, we played the game's two-on-two mode, a chaotic cooperative take on the standard versus option.

The chance to spend more time with Arms, learn its intricacies, and play with all its characters and new modes leaves me much more excited for the game than its initial announcement. A beta is on the way that will work like the recent Splatoon 2 testfire, with a few windows of online availability giving everyone a chance to try out the game's strange boxing. I am looking forward to getting in a few more rounds before release. » **Kyle Hilliard**

"A MUST-OWN GAME"

PLAYSTATION LIFESTYLE

"4.5/5"

ATTACK OF THE FANBOY

"TRULY FANTASTIC"

ROCKPAPERSHOTGUN

★★★★★

"BURSTING WITH
PERSONALITY"

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PS4



XBOX ONE

PC GAME

ARKANE STUDIOS **Bethesda**

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Pro Evolution Soccer 2018

Striving for greatness from within

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PS3
Xbox 360 • PC

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Sports
(22-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Konami

» **Developer**
Konami

» **Release**
September 12

PES' special licensing deal with Barcelona (struck last year) gives the franchise a powerful ally. The video game series receives an air of dynasty due to the team's tremendous success and recognition worldwide – not to mention the popularity of individual players like Messi and Neymar. But this belies the hard work that has brought the PES series the accolades it deserves and serves as the fuel for possible future success. Great players like the ones at Barcelona make it look easy, but it's not easy being great.

I'm most excited by PES 2018's stated attempt to take its already excellent ball control gameplay and extend it to different parts of the body. So many times in real life you see players try to corral high or errant passes with their chests or their thighs, and use different parts of their feet. If the game can replicate this smoothly – particularly as players' bodies are in ever-changing positions while on the run – then the series' already tight gameplay will have taken a big step forward. The game is also working to deliver better ball shielding and subtle ball-control movements with the analog stick.

Gamers can test out this gameplay in a new 2v2 or 3v3 online co-op mode



that also allows local friends to join in, and further competitive options exist via the game's extension of its esports PES League into the Ultimate Team-esque MyClub mode and the returning Random Selection Matches. If you prefer to play alone, the Master League career mode has an improved transfer system (hopefully with more surprises and a reflection of player wishes), better presentation (including pre-game interviews), and pre-season tournaments.

In the past few years the franchise has taken a wholesale approach for its latest iteration, deciding to improve the entire package rather than focusing in on a marquee mode or feature. By admitting that even its best parts could stand to be better, the series has thrived. Neither PES' gameplay nor Master League mode is perfect, but for the best players it's not about being perfect, it's about rising to the occasion. » **Matthew Kato**

The Look Of A Champion

Looking at PES 2018's early footage, you can already notice the benefit of the new stadium lighting, and partner clubs like Barcelona and Borussia Dortmund (and Signal Iduna Park, right) enjoy a slew of details on their iconic home turfs. Konami says more licensing news is coming shortly, which is always welcome.

Players in the game are governed by a new animation system, and the models themselves have been changed to reproduce how their kits fit. Player heads continue to improve on the pitch, with real-life images used for the gameplan menu.



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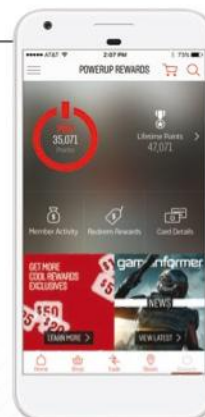
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Ever Oasis

Growing a home in the desert

» **Platform**
3DS

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Grezzo

» **Release**
June 23

Ever Oasis has an impressive pedigree behind it. Grezzo developed the 3DS remakes of *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* and *Majora's Mask*, and the game's director, Koichi Ishii, is the man behind *The Secret of Mana*. Grezzo's remakes of the *Zelda* games are excellent, which has made me excited to see what the studio can do with an original project like *Ever Oasis*. I played a few missions and tried out its combat in a recent demo.

In *Ever Oasis*, you are a fantasy creature – not quite human, not quite animal – who must restore life to an oasis in the middle of a desert. You do this by building a home and finding characters, or “seedlings” as the game refers to them, to help grow your town. You find seedlings by venturing out into the dangerous desert with a team of two other fighters, each with their own abilities.

In my demo, I took on a standard retrieval mission for someone in my town who needed an item that could only be found in the desert. My team and I enter a cave and I use a special tornado power to blow away piles of sand to collect items. The items I retrieve can be used to restock the shops in my town, and I get a percentage of the profit as they are sold. Before making my way through a nearby door, I see a friendly character and speak with him. He gives me another item retrieval mission, which is added to my queue of requests.

To get through the door, I must solve a puzzle that involves setting up a series of walls. I instantly switch to the tall character with a staff in my party via the d-pad. He can lift walls out of the sand with his staff. I then switch to the smallest member of my party, who can roll into a ball to bounce against

the walls to activate a switch. We move through the room and get ambushed by a group of enemies.

The beetle-like foes are affected by something called Chaos, which makes them evil. Every character in my party has a heavy and light attack, but they all play a little differently. You can lock onto enemies the same way you do in *Zelda*, but the combat is driven by simple combos. Curiously, you don't kill. Instead, once the enemies' health is whittled down, the Chaos leaves them and they scuttle off and disappear. Defeating the bugs lets us move onto the next area, which is much larger.

Here, I meet another friendly character who decides they would like to become part of my town just by talking to them. For the purposes of my demo, my town is sparse, with only a few shops and lots of empty spaces. As seedlings come to your town you choose where their shops go, giving you some control over its layout.

The *Ever Oasis* gameplay loop is to grow your town by taking on missions in the desert from the seedlings you meet. Sometimes you are simply exploring, sometimes you are beating up Chaos-affected bad guys and bosses, and other times you must solve puzzles. We didn't get to spend too much time with the game, but it plays well and I am eager to build up my personal oasis town mission by mission. » **Kyle Hilliard**





Hey! Pikmin

The beginner's guide to Pikmin

With its multiple screens and touch capabilities, players have assumed the management-heavy Pikmin series would someday make its way to 3DS. Organizing and commanding Pikmin using the touch controls seemed like an obvious application of the platform, and while this is something you do in Hey! Pikmin, it's not quite what I expected. The game is more of an action-platformer than a management sim.

During my hands-on demo, I played as Olimar making my way through a series of 2D platforming levels. The game's story and where it takes place in relation to the first three

Pikmin games is unclear, but you still have Pikmin, with all their familiar abilities and colors, and Olimar still collects items.

Rather than staying in one large area, building your Pikmin army as they bring items to your centralized ship, you move through a level calling Pikmin to you with a whistle as they appear on screen. You control Olimar with the control stick and tap the screen to throw Pikmin. I tap on enemies to throw Pikmin at them, and when I discover items, I throw Pikmin at them and they bring the items to me rather than a ship. Once Olimar is near the items, he opens a portal

above them, instantly sending them where they need to go. I also played an underwater level and controlled a swimming Olimar as blue Pikmin swam behind me.

Nintendo's goal with Hey! Pikmin is to create a much simpler Pikmin experience for younger players. Rather than figure out grand problems with an army on a strict timeline, I solved smaller problems with the Pikmin I found in that specific level. This is not Pikmin as I expected when I thought about the series coming to 3DS, but I enjoyed the simplified, bite-sized version of what is essentially Nintendo's take on the RTS genre. » **Kyle Hilliard**

- » **Platform**
3DS
- » **Style**
1-Player Action
- » **Publisher**
Nintendo
- » **Developer**
Arzest
- » **Release**
July 28



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Student work by: John Rogeles & George Stoll



gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH
79 Injustice 2

DC Comics' mightiest heroes and villains unite to save the planet in this extraordinary fighting experience from NetherRealm Studios. With faster movement and more evasive maneuvers at your fingertips, the fighting is richer in strategy, yet still boils down to punching someone through a building or into outer space. Players can also customize their characters with unlockable loot that adds an addictive layer of replayability to each mode.

Note: Mario Kart 8 received Game of the Month honors when it originally appeared on Wii U in 2014, so the Switch version is not eligible for the award again (despite scoring higher than Injustice 2).

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Overwatch duplicates.

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

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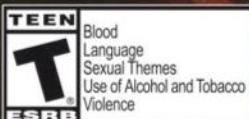
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Prey

Somewhere beyond the stars

8.25

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Bethesda **Developer** Arkane Studios **Release** May 5 **Rating** M

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept

A mysterious alien outbreak has overtaken the space station you live on. It's up to you to stop the invasion from reaching Earth

» Graphics

Character model animations are awkward but environments are gorgeous if a bit bland

» Sound

Phenomenal sound design makes the jump scares and tension work — just be sure to turn down the music a bit

» Playability

Prey is undoubtedly a complicated game, but it's worth learning the interlocking systems for the rich, emergent gameplay moments that can arise from them

» Entertainment

Though it lives a little too comfortably in the shadows of its influences, Prey is a quality horror-action game

» Replay Value

Moderate

Prey begins slowly, in appropriately sedated fashion, as scientist Morgan Yu awakens in an upper-class apartment. There's a sense of fuzziness there, an inexplicable unease that something is not right. Turns out the feeling isn't misplaced. After a trippy introduction, Prey thrusts you headfirst into its world, where merciless monsters called Typhon roam the research-focused Talos-1 space station, tearing the inhabitants to pieces. Suddenly you find yourself in the position of having to keep these aliens from getting off the station — at any cost.

Prey is concerned with who Morgan Yu is, and the game lets you choose nearly every facet of their person, including gender, skills, and even morality. The best parts of Prey often stem from how Yu interacts with other people.

Talos-1 is massive: not just structurally, but also emotionally and politically. Crew members are well-realized. They have full names; they fight, they bicker, they have office romances — they even play Dungeons & Dragons! What could otherwise be a generic horror setting feels real thanks to clever writing and solid voice-acting.

The Typhon are a terrifying foe to go up against. Even the weakest enemies, mimics, are frightening because they have the ability to camouflage themselves as ordinary objects in the environment. See a health pack conspicuously on the floor in the middle of a boardroom? Better smack it with a wrench first to make sure it's not a beast in hiding. The enemies become more

unnerving as Prey goes on, introducing shadowwalkers capable of setting you on fire and massive, floating Typhon that can shut down your equipment and make heads literally explode.

In spite of how interesting the set-up and enemies are, the early hours of gameplay are sluggish. Morgan is not a super-powered human (yet) but instead a scientist that these bullet-sponge monsters can kill in a few hits. Until you start upgrading your stats by modding your body with neuromods — Prey's equivalent of level currency — your best bet is to stick to the shadows, collecting supplies, lest you want to get torn to shreds.

However, about a third of the way through Prey, you unlock the ability to spend your neuromods to acquire Typhon powers. The abilities run the gamut from telekinesis blasts that will fling enemies across the room to the power to turn yourself into a mundane object in the environment, like a coffee mug, in order to hide from enemies or access hard to reach places. From these abilities emerge Prey's interesting take on the Play Your Way formula.

The plot itself isn't as noteworthy as the story that emerges from your abilities but it's made more interesting by the fact that your choices carry weight. Talos-1's remaining residents often have requests or are in danger. How you interact with them determines how Morgan's story ultimately plays out in the branching conclusion. Do you take the time to save some crewmates, marching halfway across the station to do so, or do you save your ammo and

time and focus on the task at hand? I was surprised at how well I was pulled into the fantasy of being Morgan, having to juggle the needs of the world versus my own.

Prey's impressive narrative execution makes its shortcomings easier to bear, but it doesn't erase them. While the combat did improve once I was able to use Typhon powers and gain cool weaponry, I never escaped the feeling that I was chipping squares off a health meter when I went up against foes. There's also a lot of backtracking, especially if you do side missions, and while those occasions aren't too annoying in themselves, they do hammer home that the space station isn't as visually diverse as it could be.

In spite of being rough around the edges, Prey still managed to consistently impress and even occasionally hit me with a sense of wonder. Sections that had me floating around the exterior of the Talos-1 in zero-G were tense, as I explored massive hull breaches for supplies like a treasure hunter, and I loved experimenting with the Gloo Gun, using it not only to immobilize enemies but also to plug up holes spewing fire and to build bridges across chasms.

In Morgan Yu, Prey invites us to create a fascinating and complicated protagonist navigating a dangerous world filled with characters worth knowing. Arkane's fusion of player-driven storytelling and flexible gameplay remains strong throughout its first sci-fi outing, and makes Prey a stellar horror adventure in spite of a handful of flaws. » **Javy Gwaltney**

Injustice 2

Of gods, monsters, and precious loot



Style 1 or 2-Player Fighting (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Warner Bros. Interactive
Developer NetherRealm Studios **Release** May 16 **Rating** T

9

PS4 • Xbox One

The Caped Crusader and the billionaire. The last survivor of Krypton and the reporter. Most of DC Comics' heroes lead double lives, all in an attempt to blend into society as seemingly ordinary people who don capes and masks when trouble arises. NetherRealm Studios' 2013 fighting game *Injustice: Gods Among Us* also balanced duality, finding success as a fun fighting experience coupled with a popular story. *Injustice 2* once again delivers knockout blows with its super-powered story and fighting, but finds a third way to entertain through an addictive collection component.

Injustice 2 doesn't reach the same level of narrative intrigue as its predecessor, but remains enjoyable for an entirely different reason. Although penned as a direct continuation to the original game and comic series, no moment is as shocking as Superman ripping out the Joker's heart; the tone also isn't as dark. This sequel instead takes the more clichéd angle of uniting heroes and villains to stop the intergalactic threat posed by Brainiac. The lurking fear of Superman being freed from his prison is a nice plot thread that adds a layer of uncertainty to the arc, but almost every sequence boils down to "everyone fights everyone."

NetherRealm delivers dumb fun in this story, which unfolds through lengthy sequences filled with epic fights, witty banter, and layer upon layer of fan service. You won't find much to think about in this narrative other than if Green Arrow's dad jokes could be any worse, but that's part of its charm – this experience focuses on the powers of the heroes more than what's going on inside of their heads.

The fighting is once again a ridiculous show of power. At any given second a hero could be punched through a pyramid, thrown into space, or mauled by Harley Quinn's hyenas. This level of



brutality is nothing new for *Injustice*, but the dancing that occurs between these catastrophic strikes is faster than before, and offers a higher level of strategy. The small touch of increasing the walking speed of each character goes a long way in removing the somewhat slow spacing game between opponents. Players have more opportunities to turn the tables on their opponents thanks to the inclusion of aerial recoveries and evasive rolls.

The game feels tighter as a whole, and many of the returning characters feel new again, for better or worse. I enjoy Batman's techniques more in this sequel, but find Superman to be strange in both appearance and functionality. The roster, while lacking some heavy hitters for narrative reasons, offers a nice variety that pulls equally from DC's gods and titans as the vigilantes, such as the Bat family and Suicide Squad.

Exploring *Injustice 2*'s deep well of strategies is one reason to keep playing, but I think most players (like myself) will also feel the pull tied to loot. Winning a match feels great no matter what, but the game amplifies that sensation with a showering of rewards, the best being gear (custom equipment that can change characters'

looks and attributes). You may also earn a performance reward called a Mother Box, which is *Injustice 2*'s form of a blind box that holds gear.

Opening a box to find new legs for Captain Cold, arms for Wonder Woman, and a head for Aquaman is a bit strange until you dive deeper into what they offer. Extensive play leads to more exotic loot that can dramatically change the look of your character, such as Hal Jordan's Green Lantern looking almost exactly like Kyle Rayner's Ion.

The high-end gear also produces significant performance bumps such as strength increasing by +200 or ability by +150. In addition to gear, you can earn new abilities, two of which can be equipped at any given time. The bonuses tied to gear don't enhance your characters for ranked matches (outside of appearance), but do come into play in most other online avenues, as well as a new mode called The Multiverse, which replaces S.T.A.R. Labs from *Gods Among Us*.

Playing off of the idea that DC's universe has an infinite number of earths, your heroes face off against alternate versions of themselves, some stronger, and others with unforeseeable powers. Multiverse is a beautifully designed avenue of play featuring daily, weekly, and monthly challenges, each testing your skills in different ways, all in the hope of unlocking more loot.

Injustice 2 is a huge game, offering a lengthy story-based campaign, a great fighting experience, and a nearly endless supply of loot. The small tweaks to combat go a long way in creating a more dynamic flow, which resonates well in multiplayer matches. With DC's cinematic universe pumping out one bad movie after another, *Injustice 2* is the best way to see just how powerful and diverse its heroes are. » **Andrew Reiner**

» Concept

A sequel that offers enhanced combat, a silly (but action-packed) story, and collectible loot galore

» Graphics

Few details are spared as the titans clash and the world is destroyed around them, even in the little things like lip-syncing. The only real oddity: What's up with Superman's new costume?

» Sound

The amount of character chatter for matches is mighty impressive. You even hear characters comment on confronting themselves, or have a special saying or two for their arch nemeses

» Playability

Little enhancements to speed and evasive maneuvers create a more fluid and dynamic combat experience

» Entertainment

A deep game that hits hard in three key areas: fighting, story, and collecting

» Replay Value

High



Rime

A somber rabbit hole

8

Style 1-Player Puzzle **Publisher** Grey Box, Six Foot **Developer** Tequila Works **Release** May 26 **Rating** E10+

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept

Push a child through an increasingly abstract world by solving puzzles and slowly unraveling the true nature of the adventure

» Graphics

Rime's strong colors and the boy's excellent animation make every location beautiful in its own distinct way

» Sound

The entire game is accented by swells of violin and piano that grow steadily over the course of the adventure, lending each area an emotional weight

» Playability

The boy controls well overall, though I did encounter the occasional stutter and unresponsive leap. Thankfully, impeccable platforming is never a requirement for forward progress

» Entertainment

Rime's puzzles rarely challenge, sometimes making you feel dumb for missing the obvious solution rather than smart for figuring them out, but the journey is a strong one with a satisfying ending

» Replay Value

Moderate

Rime begins with a child suddenly waking up in a mysterious location. As a player, you have no idea why you're there, how you got there, or what your goal is. It's an opening that has become increasingly familiar in the world of independent and indie-style games, but it's an undeniably effective way to set up an intriguing adventure. Rime never strays too far from the "indie" trappings of ambiguous narrative, mysterious puzzles in a mysterious land, and a young protagonist incapable of fighting, but it delivers a meaningful and satisfying finale that shook me in a way I was not expecting.

Rime is structured as a continuous series of puzzles and environments. It doesn't have any combat, but players face occasional dangers from strange hooded beings and a large imposing creature in the second level. Some areas are large and let you tackle puzzles in any order, while others shuffle you down a specific path. The boy can jump, climb, interact with moveable boxes, and activate switches to help him solve puzzles.

The puzzles did little to get me excited and typically involved moving boxes into place, or finding the right path to climb. Solutions are usually obvious immediately, or just a matter of looking in the right direction. I still enjoyed solving them, and was satisfied in particular with an area that played with the level design in unexpected ways, but sometimes I was just looking around until I saw the telltale identification of a climbable ledge.



Solving puzzles opens new doors, keeping you in a constant state of progression as you move through each of the thematically distinct levels. Between those levels, cutscenes offer a peek at the larger story. The game does not have any dialogue, but the boy is well-characterized thanks to his excellent animation, and he meets likeable characters who are eager to help him. Hints of Ico permeate the experience, along with smatterings of Journey, and I even recalled a little bit of The Witness as I explored. The general ambiguity of the game prepared me to not learn much about why I was doing what I was doing and just enjoy the puzzles and scenery – but Rime surprised me there.

A man in a red cloak, matching the boy's red cape, acts as the main narrative hook to the boy's journey. A history

exists with this mysterious man, but who is he? Why he is always just out of reach? Few questions are answered during the majority of the game, but a specific story is being told, one that becomes very clear in the end. I wouldn't call it a twist, but it made me look back on the journey with a new appreciation for its purpose.

After leaving the first area, the world changes in a dramatic way. You move from a tropical island to a desert in need of a rainstorm filled with unused technology. The setting is different, as are the dangers. I continued to solve the same type of puzzles, but they felt distinct. The same can be said for the following three levels, which explore lush underground environments and abandoned factories, as well as difficult-to-describe locations. They have their own mechanics based around the core climbing and puzzle-solving, but each level feels different and is compelling in its own way, sometimes making the boy play with strange technology or outrun a fearsome beast. Seeing how much each level changed made me eager to see what was around each corner through the entirety of the game.

Rime's world and story are where it shines. It pulls the player through strange seemingly disconnected environments, slowly revealing its true meaning as you move deeper. In the end, everything is sharply pulled into focus with a simple, but dramatic final story revelation and level. It made me want to replay the game from my new perspective and even seek out the collectibles I had earlier written off as unnecessary. Many elements of Rime are familiar, but it is an effective use of the medium and expertly builds up to (and executes) its cathartic finale.

» **Kyle Hilliard**





The Surge

A mechanical soul

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Focus Home Interactive **Developer** Deck13 Interactive **Release** May 16 **Rating** M

7

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Deck13 Interactive made a name for itself with 2014's *Lords of the Fallen*, a punishing action game known for drawing heavy inspiration from *Dark Souls*. The spirit of the bonfire once again burns in Deck13's *The Surge*, but isn't as vibrant or warming. Flickers of fresh ideas can be seen in a familiar smoldering core, but the big differentiating hook of a science-fiction setting is its least engaging aspect. The Surge's vision of the future doesn't have much of a soul, unfolding through cluttered junkyards and darkened factory interiors occupied by the same type of enemies that hammer home the feeling of repetition.

The Surge begins with a strong narrative that puts a foreboding mystery front and center. Bound to a wheelchair, you entrust your future to a megacorporation called CREO, all in the hope of walking again. All you have to do is join CREO with no questions asked – a company that wants to heal the world and undo the damage done from global warming and wars. CREO's jet-set technologies can even heal you, but at what cost? What happens after you click the "join us now" button? You'll walk again, but what are you truly signing up for?

If CREO's initiation process worked as intended, you'd be a field technician in a mobility-enhancing exo-suit. As you are fitted with the technology, the sedation process goes horribly wrong. Screws are jammed into your flesh by a robotic being, and you scream in agony. You lose consciousness during this traumatic moment, only to awaken in a junkyard filled with other people wearing

suits just like yours – but they aren't aware like you are. They appear to be an army of mindless drones. Someone (or something) has taken control of CREO's complex and its occupants. From this point on, your primary goal is to survive, and doing so means diving deeper into CREO's facility.

This is a cool setup for the adventure at hand, but it doesn't prepare you for the level of repetition that comes next. Most of the enemies are humanoids outfitted in different armors. Outside of a few robotic foes (and something far deadlier in the game's final act), your opposition doesn't offer much variety in look or tactics. Not only is it a drag to battle essentially the same enemy types across the entire game, but repetition is also found in the environments.

Even though everything feels somewhat similar, *The Surge* excels in combat. The crowning achievement of Deck13's work is a limb-based targeting system that rewards the player handsomely. You either get the satisfaction of picking away at an enemy's weak spot for an easier kill, or a more challenging fight that delivers valuable loot specific to the targeted body part. If you build up a meter to unleash a finishing move, you can cut off an appendage to gain the armor or weapon attached to it – a gory action that doubles as a nice exclamation point for excelling at combat.

The combat system is backed by solid controls for a variety of weapon classes. The basic vertical and horizontal attacks feel powerful and carry a true sense of weight, and blocking and countering are easy to initiate.

A drone is also used effectively to open up attack windows from a distance, or offer a shield that can protect you for a few seconds. Enemy movements are telegraphed clearly, making most fights (and deaths) feel fair.

Bosses pose enormous challenges, as they can destroy you in a hit or two, but again patterns are clearly conveyed, and it's just a matter of figuring out their weaknesses to take them down. I struggled a bit with an axe-wielding adversary who summons a harder version of the game's first boss, yet retreated to level up a bit more, and managed to take him down after a few attempts.

I played most of the game wielding just two weapons, both from the same class. Part of the reason was to maintain familiarity with the combat mechanics, but it's beneficial to stick with the same weapon as each class levels up through use. I love this aspect of the game, as I was more likely to farm enemies to enhance my chances further down the road than run past them. Again, this is where a lack of enemy variety hurts the experience. You want to fight through each zone, but it just becomes a chore.

I didn't mind investing over 50 hours to the grind in *The Surge*. I felt powerful at times, and exploring every little area rewarded me with a nice bounty. It just clings too tightly to a one-note approach to world building, enemy encounters, and level design. This is a genre that has a rich history of wowing players, but I was never dazzled by *The Surge*. I mostly felt like I was battling animated junk in a junkyard. » **Andrew Reiner**

» Concept

The Surge tries to be *Dark Souls* in space. It delivers a challenging quest that requires extensive grinding against the same enemy types

» Graphics

Environments are teeming with little details and atmospheric effects, but enemies lack variety and each area looks somewhat like the last. It's science fiction that looks ordinary

» Sound

Music cues effectively trigger tense combat scenarios, and the clanging of steel and ripping of flesh are always rewarding

» Playability

A nicely designed combat system allows players to pick away at foes in different ways and gain valuable loot in the process

» Entertainment

A promising entry into the budding "Souls" genre that delivers excellent combat and far too much repetition in the enemies and environments

» Replay Value

Moderate

Little Nightmares

A grotesque tale that plays off the familiar

9



Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Tarsier Studios **Developer** Bandai Namco **Release** April 28 **Rating** T

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept

Maneuver a small hero through a series of nightmarish environments using your wits and platforming skills

» Graphics

Little Nightmares is a visual stunner, masterfully rendering out a variety of horrific and memorable scenarios

» Sound

The score is sparse, but effective. Toy piano sounds tinkle over the low thrumming of machinery and other otherworldly sounds

» Playability

You're never asked to do anything that the controls aren't capable of delivering

» Entertainment

I wanted to replay it the instant I finished

» Replay Value

Moderately high

Little Nightmares is like hearing a cover of one of your favorite songs. On first glance, much of Tarsier Studios' game seems like a riff on Playdead's *Limbo* or *Inside*; it has puzzle-platforming with a vulnerable hero, and is set in a bizarre and hostile world. As I spent more time with *Little Nightmares*, however, its own nightmarish melody rang loud and clear. It's an amazing work in its own right, and a must-play for anyone who enjoys tightly crafted platformers and grotesque horror.

You play as Six, a little girl in a yellow rain slicker. Very little is explicitly spelled out in the title; there's an exciting sense of discovery that permeates the entire game, from opening to end credits. You begin as you awaken in an opened suitcase, with no opening text or voiceover. You don't get any prompts on what to do next. Instead, you experiment. One button flicks open Six's lighter, providing a tiny flicker of illumination. Another allows her to crouch and keep a lower profile in the 2.5D environment. You don't know where you are or where you're trying to go, but one thing is made almost immediately apparent: You aren't safe.

Six isn't a fighter. She can't defend herself, and most of the oversized creatures that inhabit this creepy world can kill her instantaneously. The setup alone adds a sense of tension to the action, but the artfully designed world escalates it to unnerving levels. Comparisons to *Limbo* and *Inside* are inevitable, but they also serve to show where *Little Nightmares* parts company from its predecessors. Playdead explores urban environments, military facilities, and other dystopian locations. *Little Nightmares* places its horror much closer to home.



Many of the locations are based on familiar places, but taken to absurd or strange levels. Chests of drawers extend to the ceiling, and their handles can be used as ladders. A piano is suspended on a rope, serving as a platform. A sea of abandoned shoes hides a lethal, unseen danger for anyone who lingers while wading through the debris. Large humanoid figures are a persistent source of danger, whether they're blindly reaching for her with nightmarishly long arms or frantically trying to stuff her into their mouths. Thankfully, she's nimble enough to avoid danger – but just barely. Having those recognizable touchstones is an effective way to pull you in as a player, twisting them just enough to seem otherworldly.

Much of the game revolves around how to navigate the oversized world, pulling chairs to the proper spot to reach a door handle, or swinging on a chain to race through a door before it slams shut. Some of the sections feel a little derivative – a mercifully brief section with a roving spotlight comes to mind – but a spark of creativity runs through most of the creepy adventure. The camera itself

adds to the uneasy feeling, swaying and bobbing as it pans to keep Six in focus. The presentation has a voyeuristic quality, which isn't by accident.

Little Nightmares isn't a horror game in a traditional sense, but it's filled with horrifying imagery and some of the most wretched sights I've seen in a long time. Even without any graphic violence or gore, it's deeply unsettling. It has some genuinely frightening moments, but they're rarely jump-scare setups. Instead, the sense of danger builds as you work your way through the strange, labyrinthine world. Sneaking past a pair of creatures who are washing dishes doesn't seem like a particularly electrifying moment, but the cat-and-mouse chase that erupts when they hear your footsteps is exhilarating. One of the most rewarding aspects is the numerous one-off moments and scenarios – and being surprised is a big part of that. Without spoiling anything, Tarsier Studios does a phenomenal job of establishing expectations, and then letting them crash down around the player at just the right moments.

Players who like getting explicit answers are likely going to feel let down by the *Little Nightmares*' conclusion. Things aren't spelled out for you in the end, but I wasn't disappointed. If anything, its ambiguous nature made me want to play through it again and pick up smaller details that may have gone unnoticed. The specificity of some of the references – nooses, masks, and those shoes – points to a greater mystery that fans will probably be discussing long after release. Thanks to *Little Nightmares*' respectfully short length (I took my time and finished that second playthrough in a couple of hours), it's a great game to show to friends who appreciate imaginative horror.

» Jeff Cork





What Remains Of Edith Finch

Making an old house feel new



Style 1-Player Adventure Publisher Annapurna Interactive Developer Giant Sparrow Release April 25 Rating T

8.75

What Remains of Edith Finch is full of life, even as it fixates on death. Bending or building on many conventions, developer Giant Sparrow has a story full of hope and sadness to tell, and finds incredibly clever ways to tell it – all wrapped in the framework of a young woman unearthing her family's secrets. Games like *Gone Home* and *Firewatch* have popularized the process of exploring mysterious settings and uncovering clues, and *What Remains of Edith Finch* is the next major step forward in that tradition.

Edith Finch is the last surviving member in a bloodline full of misfortune, and you explore her family home while learning about the disappearances and deaths of her relatives. You find your way into their long-sealed rooms, which usually contain scenes about their last moments on Earth. This premise alone is fascinating, and the attention to detail in the rooms and their furnishings is remarkable, but what sets this game apart is how it makes each character's story feel unique. Gamers can only collect so many journals, letters, and audio logs before the narratives in this subgenre start to feel routine; *What Remains of Edith Finch* has some of those standbys, but folds them in with shifting gameplay and perspectives that are consistently surprising. It makes you feel present, so you're never left idle by reading or listening to dialogue.

Discovering the framing of these tragic tales is a major force propelling

you through the story, so I won't spoil all of the details, but the variety among the scenarios is especially impressive. In one case, you see a fantasy world gradually grow in complexity as it encroaches on (and takes over) reality. In another, you watch a story occur on comic-book pages, with you occasionally taking control within the panels. In a particularly surreal sequence, you jump between a variety of animal predators and pursue their prey. The gameplay and presentation make each scene distinct, leaving you excited to see the next one – though you already know the grim conclusion.

What Remains of Edith Finch is like an interactive short-story anthology, and Edith's journey through the house is the thread tying everything together. You've probably explored spooky mansions in games before, but not quite like this. Even walking through the abandoned halls is interesting, since Edith's thoughts and memories appear as text on various surfaces, occasionally giving the cool sensation that you are literally moving through the story. Other times, the location of the text also serves to guide your attention, delivering the story at a steady pace and preventing you from wandering aimlessly. In the few hours it took me to finish one play-through, I never felt stuck or uncertain about my next step.

Most of the Finches' tales stand alone, giving you a satisfying sense of progress as you finish them. Learning about her relatives is presented as

Edith's main objective, and that goal is accomplished. However, my biggest complaint is that a larger, overarching question remains unanswered: What is the driving force behind all of the tragedy? The game raises this issue several times, and just when you think you are about to put the pieces together, you are denied the opportunity. I don't mind when stories leave room for interpretation, but in this case, you are teased with information you've been waiting for only to have it stolen away. Even if this is an intended parallel between Edith's search for answers and the player's, the moment leaves a conspicuous hole in the story and makes an important aspect feel unfinished. But ultimately, that is only one thread that left me disappointed among many that didn't.

Narrative is an important part of many genres, but for games focused solely on interactive stories, it is the pillar that bears the weight of the entire experience – a burden *What Remains of Edith Finch* handles deftly. Giant Sparrow devised innovative tricks to pull players in, making them more active participants in the significant events. The Finches' final moments are diverse and sometimes disconnected, but they have a thematic consistency running through them, so the tale builds on itself and delivers a compact and memorable experience. Juggling multiple perspectives and thoughtful reflections, *What Remains of Edith Finch* is an excellent example of what makes games unique as a storytelling medium. » **Joe Juba**

PS4 • PC

» Concept

Relive the deaths of your relatives as you explore a strange house and uncover family secrets

» Graphics

The visual style successfully shifts to suit the needs of the story, but also does the job when providing more functional backdrops

» Sound

Atmospheric music and solid voice work make it easy to get immersed

» Playability

Expect standard first-person controls while exploring, and the sequences that use other mechanics usually work well – and they're over quickly if they don't

» Entertainment

The diversity in the Finches' final moments means you've always got another cool story just around the corner, and Edith's personal journey is also interesting

» Replay Value

Moderately low

Perception

Losing your sight and sanity

8.25

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept

As a blind woman, you maneuver through a haunted mansion using echolocation

» Graphics

The crudely outlined, blue-hued graphics can be dull, but they add a sense of mystery to your surroundings

» Sound

Perception's sound design is fantastically atmospheric, making scares more tense

» Playability

Moving around the house is smooth and easy, with markers telling you where to go

» Entertainment

Although more unsettling than outright terrifying, Perception brings some novel ideas to the horror genre

» Replay Value

Moderate

Survival horror makes you feel threatened through your limitations. Perception takes this philosophy to an extreme: You play as a blind young woman named Cassie, maneuvering through a haunted mansion with echolocation, all while a ghostly presence stalks you. By teasing you with the unknown and playing with your senses, Perception largely succeeds at horror with its novel concept.

Cassie travels to Massachusetts to investigate an abandoned mansion that has plagued her nightmares. To search for the truth, players rummage through belongings of the house's past inhabitants to solve compelling mysteries. You complete character-driven tales of the home's ghostly inhabitants, jumping through time as the estate transforms to represent each chapter's era, as far back as the 1600s.

The residents include an overly medicated mother and a tinkerer of creepy mechanical dolls – all with the house's supernatural forces making them paranoid about their problems and affecting their sanity. For example, when one character worries for her husband fighting overseas, the mansion's aesthetic turns into a warzone. The premise is strange, but the individual stories are compellingly morbid and propel the narrative forward.

In each scenario, you “see” with echolocation, and visual cues occur through sound. With the tap of your cane (or ambient noise like TV static and footsteps), your surroundings become more visible in crude blue outlines. It's an intuitive mechanic that makes you feel vulnerable, especially when a monster known as the Presence can hear you.



In Perception, the world is seen through crude outlines, but Cassie can use her phone to read labels and notes

Every time echolocation is used, the creature gets closer to hunting you down, and your only chance of survival is scoping out a hiding spot.

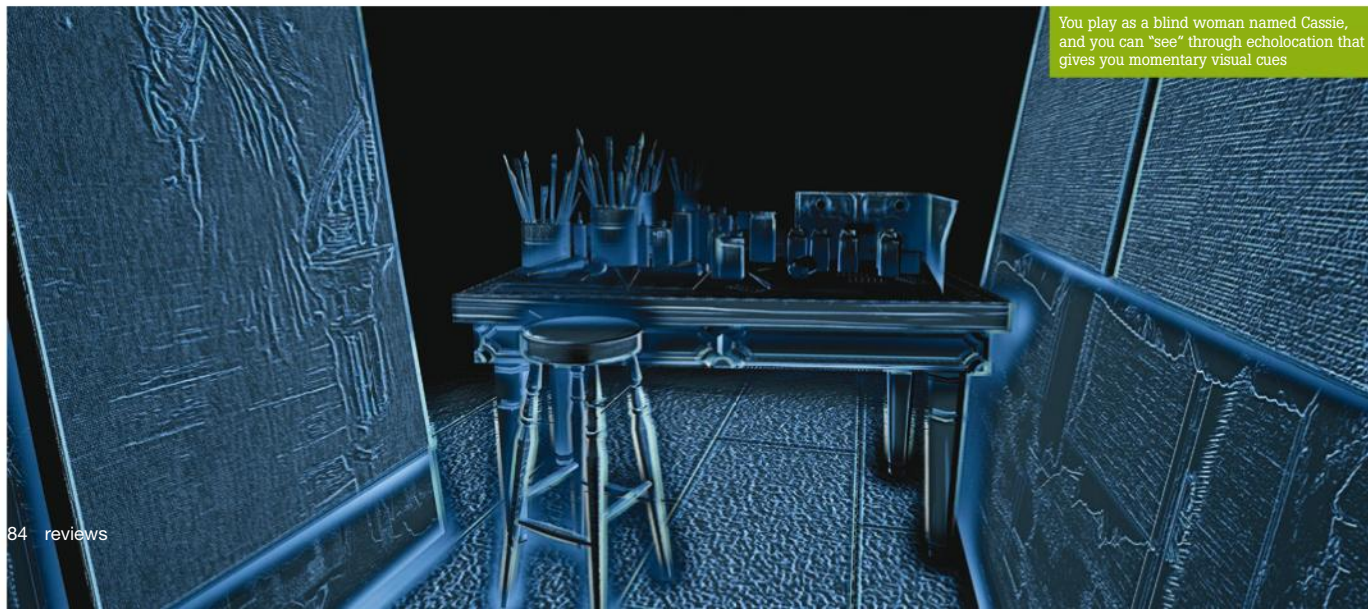
Perception is largely about gauging how safe you are. Whether echolocation will help you proceed to your next goal or attract an unwanted enemy depends on your foresight. This is a game of hide-and-seek, and it is an unnervingly entertaining experience when your sight is limited.

Outside of echolocation, Cassie's only tool is her phone, which she uses to scan labels or read notes through text to speech. She also uses an app called Friendly Eyes, where you briefly chat with a customer representative who describes things you can't see. These chats bring some light humor, and other times they just add to the fear. While jump scares occur every once in a while, Perception's biggest terrors are the ones you can't see and the mind tricks that make you question reality. Quick flashes of a ghoul in the

distance or the creak of a door closing would spook me.

Augmented by these frightening moments, Perception's story is well-written and focused on exploration. The solid voice acting brings life to mundane objects, where you trigger a ghost's memory by examining things like a paint brush or mug. Perception's biggest drawback is while it emphasizes exploration, you're limited in terms of how well you can explore a room when echolocation attracts enemies. The game also features mostly monochromatic environments, an aesthetic that gets old as the journey continues, but the ever-changing house brings variety to areas you revisit.

Perception is a memorable horror experience that thrives because of its unique setup and gameplay. Although more unsettling than downright terrifying, Perception managed to keep me on the edge of my seat, forcing me to solve a compelling mystery by facing what lurked in the dark. » **Elise Favis**



You play as a blind woman named Cassie, and you can “see” through echolocation that gives you momentary visual cues

Strafe

Mostly mediocre memories

Style 1-Player Action Publisher Devolver Digital Developer Pixel Titans Release May 9 Rating M

6

PS4 • PC • Mac

» Concept

Blast your way through a tough, procedurally generated world designed to capture the look and feel of '90s shooters

» Graphics

Strafe look bad, but that's because it deliberately attempts to channel the original Quake, Wolfenstein, and Doom

» Sound

The score provides some appropriate tension and blood pumping, but the sounds themselves lack weight

» Playability

Easy to pick up and play, but the difficulty combined with roguelike elements push progression into the realm of the lucky and the skilled

» Entertainment

The deadly dangers combined with randomization make for a frustrating, inconsistent mix that's more about '90s nods than entertainment

» Replay Value

Moderate



When things get too crazy, turn to your big explosive options

Strafe is a fast-paced, '90s throw-back shooter that has you running and gunning through procedurally generated levels past hordes of deadly foes. Whether you're nailing opponents with head shots, sniping off limbs, or turning the entire screen into a slaughter with grenades, everything just becomes a big, bloody mess. These piles of gore are sort of a metaphor for Strafe itself – a giant goopy mound of parts that never really work together, though you can tell there might be something neat underneath all the clutter.

Strafe attempts to conjure up nostalgia to provide a shooting experience inspired by the FPS genre's early greats. It focuses on relentless combat against tides of foes, but it feels weak and devoid of impact. The weapons lack weight, the encounters feel more frustrating than challenging, and the repetitive gameplay doesn't do much to ignite the senses. Unlike the name of the title would imply, strafing is a poor tactic in a world where silent enemies are always coming at you from the sides, making one of the more effective strategies to funnel all the enemies into a tunnel and wipe them out with your secondary fire abilities en masse.

While there are many factors going against it, Strafe successfully emulates the blood-soaked, ultra-edgy vibe of games long past. Classics like Quake,

Wolfenstein, and Doom serve as inspirations, but Strafe's navel-gazing is mostly reserved to secret areas and winks, like tailored rooms with famous weapons and direct nods to these old shooters. While those little gems are fun, the gameplay leaves much to be desired.

Strafe's commitment to classic shooters is vastly overshadowed by its commitment to being a difficult roguelike. Levels are bolted together in various ways to make every attempt different, but they're also loaded with frustration and uncertainty. Once you discover the basics of survival, you are largely left at the mercy of chance. I enjoy challenging, masochistic games, but you gain no valuable knowledge from run to run here. You simply hope that you win the battle of random chance multiple times in succession to make your run a bit smoother, like getting health when you need it or an "upgrade" that doesn't make your weapon worse.

You can go from weak to powerful quickly if you're lucky enough to find the right perks and weapon upgrades. Or you can die huddled in a corner, out of ammo and clinging to your basic weapon. This sort of variety between attempts isn't fun or compelling; the time you snag a sweet rocket launcher or unlock a secret room filled with '90s gaming throwbacks could be the same time you die to a random elevator

crushing you.

I haven't completed Strafe, and I have no desire to. My best efforts have taken me to the end of the second of four large areas, Black Canyon. The game seems tuned to stymie progression, and the few tools you can find to assist with continual progress (like a teleporter) are a challenge to set up. Unlike many roguelikes I've known and loved, Strafe never made me say, "One more time, I got this" after a death. It sparks no desire to push back against the gates for a victory.

Strafe succeeds at being a suitable homage of referential nostalgia-laden trinkets, but there's no other real reason you should play it. If you want the feel of an old shooter, you should probably go play one of those instead of Strafe.

» Daniel Tack



New dangers await you in each zone



Farpoint

Shooting for the moon

7

Style 1-Player Shooter (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Sony Interactive Entertainment **Developer** Impulse Gear **Release** May 16 **Rating** E

PSVR

» Concept

Bring a full-length, sci-fi first-person shooter to virtual reality

» Graphics

The Mars-like planet lacks environmental variety, but the characters are well animated

» Sound

Strong voice acting from Laura Bailey keeps you interested in the story's direction, and Impulse Gear makes clever use of ambient noise to keep you on your toes

» Playability

The PlayStation Aim controller is precise as long as you don't move to the edges of the tracking boundary

» Entertainment

Farpoint may not move the needle as a shooter, but it's a sound VR experience if you can deal with the slight simulation sickness caused by the locomotion

» Replay Value

Moderately low

Virtual reality is supposed to be the next big thing in video games, but we're still waiting for a singular game to demonstrate the platform's trailblazing possibilities. Outside of notable exceptions like *Resident Evil VII* and *Robo Recall*, the majority of experiences so far have been little more than demo-sized proofs of concept. Impulse Gear's first VR game, *Farpoint*, is much more ambitious.

This sci-fi shooter places you in the spacesuit of a pilot flying a routine mission to pick up some scientists studying an energy anomaly near Jupiter. During the boarding process, the anomaly surges, sucking in the scientists and your ship. When you wake up hours later on an unknown planet, you must search for any living crew while fending off the hostile threats of this alien world. From there, the story unfolds largely via holograms you find along the way, and while it won't win a Nebula Award, the tale is compelling enough to draw you into the next firefight.

VR developers are still trying to solve locomotion, so nearly every game tries a different navigation solution. *Farpoint* gives you control of one analog stick to let you move forward, backward, and side to side as if you were riding on a camera dolly. The movement is awkward, but I adjusted to it over time. It feels more natural than the teleportation solution favored by other first-person shooters, though it's higher impact for those prone to simulation sickness.

Farpoint can be played with a standard controller, but it excels with the bundled PlayStation Aim controller

(which costs an additional \$30). This gun-shaped peripheral feels natural, and was surprisingly accurate as long as I didn't move to the boundaries of the tracking area. Its best feature is the holographic sight Impulse Gear programmed into the game; you can quickly switch from staring down the sights to taking a wider view of the environment just by lifting your head slightly.

Your journey through this unknown planet pits you against a variety of arachnids, aliens, and robots. The enemy variety keeps the shooting fresh, but I quickly grew bored of the monotone, largely barren environments. Impulse Gear sprinkles a few boss fights that demand calculated approaches to keep the action fresh, and you gain access to new weaponry as you work your way through the approximately six-hour campaign.

Farpoint feels like a throwback shooter, favoring corridor fights and weapon pickups of yesteryear to the more wide-open affairs and customizable weaponry of modern console games. The game suffers from a few quality of life issues. The poorly designed checkpoint system doesn't save your progress if you have to turn off your console, instead restarting you at the beginning of the level. You can only pick up ammo for the weapon you are currently holding, which means if you want to restock on rockets for your assault rifle and grenades for your shotgun under-barrel attachment, you need to pull out each one.

As a virtual reality showcase, *Farpoint* combines many of the more riveting

techniques I've seen in other VR experiences. You get an incredible sense of scale facing off against towering enemies like a giant queen spider. Smaller arachnids attack by jumping at your head, forcing you to quickly duck if your shot doesn't turn it into blood mist. Falling rocks and other ambient noises keep your head on a swivel as you prepare for the next threat. Some large-scale battles create an amazing spectacle with laser fire piercing through the air and a cacophony of explosions all around you. Impulse Gear may not bring many new ideas to the table, but I haven't seen many other VR games stitch so many of these moments together.

In addition to the campaign, *Farpoint* offers some offline challenges to test your mettle and a handful of online cooperative maps as well. These small combat scenarios send waves of enemies to your positions as you advance with a friend through the same boring locales as the campaign. The multiplier-driven scoring system lets you compare your performance to other players, but these modes are little more than diversions.

Farpoint is not the system-selling game the PSVR desperately needs. This competent shooter sews together a few VR thrills and benefits from the excellent PlayStation Aim controller, but the linear design feels dated by comparison to contemporary shooters. Therein lies the rub for virtual reality right now – you can't innovate with dated concepts, even if they have a sheen of novelty overlaying them. » **Matt Bertz**

Mages Of Mystralia

Work your magic in this Zelda-like adventure

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Borealys Games **Developer** Borealys Games **Release** May 18 **Rating** E10+

8

PC

Plenty of games allow players to overcome their enemies by raining down fire from the sky or channeling lightning through their fingertips. Magic is a fun solution to many problems, but few games bother with the finer mechanics of how a magic spell works. *Mages of Mystralia* is a rare experience in that regard; Borealys Games' Kickstarter-funded adventure is one of the few games that makes constructing magic as fun as actually casting.

After accidentally burning down a portion of her hometown, a young girl named Zia discovers she has a rare aptitude for the arcane arts. She is soon taken in by a guild of mages willing to help hone her craft. However, when an eclipse suddenly darkens the land, Zia is forced into a mystery and must ultimately save a kingdom full of those who fear the magically adept. The story (told with the help of *Forgotten Realms* creator Ed Greenwood) contains a few fun twists, but largely feels like a generic quest full of magical McGuffins.

Narrative aside, *Mages of Mystralia's* gameplay is engrossing enough to keep you hooked throughout Zia's journey. At its heart is a magic system that lets you design your own spells. Zia amasses a collection of magical runes, which are used to make new spells. For example, if you attach a movement rune to a basic fire spell, you create a fireball to hurl at your enemies. But why stop there? You can then take that fireball spell and add duplication and homing runes to cook up a triple fireball attack that chases enemies across the screen. By the end of the game, I was whipping up icy hurricanes that ended in brilliant firework displays and darting teleportation attacks that surrounded me with pinwheels of fire.

Conjuring elemental firestorms is fun, but crafting new spells from scratch feels like real alchemy. To draft a new ability, you add runes to a spell board, fitting them together like pieces of a puzzle. Some only have a few connection points, so figuring out how to fit the desired runes onto a single board often feels like its own unique logic puzzle. Don't worry about running out of interesting spell combinations; by the end of the game I felt like I was still discovering the limits of my power. I've cast hundreds of magic spells in a variety of games, but I've never felt like more of a scholar of the mystic arts than when I discovered a new rune combination in *Mages of Mystralia*.



Outside of this brilliant magic system is a somewhat by-the-numbers, *Zelda*-inspired adventure that has Zia running across Mystralia and solving environmental puzzles. Some of the challenges are clever, but half of the time I was simply lighting a series of torches under a certain time limit or creating otherwise useless, one-off spells such as a fireball that flies in a perfect circle. Solving all of Mystralia's puzzles also requires a lot of backtracking through old areas, and the fast-travel points scattered

across the landscape are too few and far between.

If you don't mind taking the scenic route, *Mages of Mystralia* provides the unique opportunity to write your own spell book. Up until the end of the game, I was unlocking new runes that exponentially added to my magical arsenal. Piecing all of those runes into a new master spell made me feel like the most creative mage who'd ever lived, making this light-hearted adventure truly magical. »Ben Reeves

» Concept

A fantasy adventure in the vein of classic 2D *Zelda* titles where the main character is a mage who constructs her own spells

» Graphics

Borealys' vibrant, cartoony world is fun to explore, but the character designs are generic – especially the protagonist's

» Sound

The soundtrack is mostly unremarkable and sometimes so subdued that I wasn't even aware of the background music

» Playability

Constructing your own spells is often a complex puzzle that takes some trial-and-error. Thankfully, the results are worth the effort

» Entertainment

The basic hack-and-slash action is simple enough to get the job done, but reconfiguring your spells to overcome each puzzle and combat challenge is consistently rewarding

» Replay Value

Moderately high



Warhammer 40,000: Dawn Of War III

Gently tweaking tradition

7.75

Style 1-Player Strategy (6-Player Online) Publisher Sega Developer Relic Release April 27 Rating M

PC

» Concept

Play as three popular Warhammer 40,000 factions in a battle to control territory and resources

» Graphics

Big battles can get messy, but the war generally looks great as giant units cut swaths through common infantry

» Sound

Appropriate and flavorful voice acting accompanies a satisfying score

» Playability

The game is effective at teaching the basics so anyone can pick up and play, but Dawn of War III isn't meant for genre newcomers

» Entertainment

While the campaign can feel like a lifeless chore, the multiplayer options offer interesting tweaks on classic genre staples

» Replay Value

Moderate

The RTS genre is constantly attempting to reinvent itself, as much of the attention in the last decade is instead given to their progeny, the MOBA. Dawn of War sparingly borrows several elements from the emerging genre to add some framework to the RTS, but doesn't do so at great sacrifice to the predecessors that spawned it. Dawn of War III successfully taps into the flavor of the Warhammer 40,000 universe with spirited troops from three classic factions and larger-than-life Elite units. At the same time, it takes multiplayer in a different direction, borrowing from both previous games in the franchise and adding several new bits and pieces.

The campaign is easily the weakest part – a trek through 17 stages that can seem excruciatingly dull at times, going through the motions of building up a sizable enough force to lay siege on whatever opponent you're against. While many stages exist to play through, many of them end up feeling the same or completely forgettable. On a positive note, the player is forced to play as all three factions, learning their strengths and weaknesses, how to use elite units, and earning currency to unlock essential multiplayer customization options. I can only recommend the campaign as sort of glorified (and exceedingly long) tutorial for players who need to learn how to play.

Multiplayer is another story, and a refreshing take on the genre – though



Proper positioning and ability use is essential for victory

purists may be irritated by the inclusion of modern elements. As always, it comes down to a resource race where you and your team can decide to go for an early victory or attempt to capture and hold to win in the long term. It would be a mistake to identify the multiplayer as a MOBA experience, but lanes and bases absolutely make it a more structured fracas than previous titles. The priority remains on a war of attrition, battling over resource points and eventually overwhelming the enemy. Giant elite units like the majestic imperial knights, gorkanauts, and wraithknights command enough power to wade through enemies like butter, and feel extremely impactful and powerful. Dropping imperial knight Solaria into the middle of a fray, blasting off rockets, and mowing down minor infantry with dual Gatling guns is fun and exciting.

Depending on how you view the RTS experience, you will either love or hate these game-defining units, along with other powerful abilities and characters available for the elite point resource, as they absolutely draw attention away from classic unit-to-unit warfare. Heroic units are not new to the genre at all, and while the slight but significant elements from MOBAs that the game does tap into may miff hardcore RTS fans, the tuning elements and selective borrowing made multiplayer enjoyable.

Dawn of War III is a mixed bag, featuring a forgettable campaign and enjoyable multiplayer, assuming you are willing to make some compromises to the traditional formula. I'm glad Relic is attempting some new tweaks while maintaining the sanctity of the almost-untouchable legacy of Warhammer 40,000. » **Daniel Tack**

Command massive elite units



Ultra Street Fighter II: The Final Challengers

A passable victory lap

Style 1 or 2-Player Action (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Capcom **Developer** Capcom **Release** May 26 **Rating** T

7

Switch

» Concept

Take the landmark fighting game on the go with two new characters and some new modes

» Graphics

Classic sprites are still detailed and fluid considering their age. The modern facelift from 2008's HD Remix looks nice, but makes the lack of animation frames more noticeable

» Sound

Stage themes from the arcade version of Super Turbo are vibrant and lively

» Playability

The Joy-Con's analog sticks and buttons aren't the ideal way to do Sonic Booms and Shoryukens, though the game feels more at home on a Pro Controller

» Entertainment

This is still an incredibly fun fighting game to have at the ready and online, but Ultra's new modes and features are all minor additions

» Replay Value

High

Street Fighter II is a peerless fighting game. It catapulted the fighting genre into the mainstream 26 years ago, and remains one of its best exemplars. Ultra Street Fighter II: The Final Challengers still has the immediate, dynamic fun of the original. The mind games of outplaying your opponent, throwing projectiles to zone them, and landing a well-timed blow is a blast. However, many of the additions surrounding that fun in Ultra are either short-lived novelties or outright terrible, and certainly not enough to make this the definitive version of a classic.

Ultra's final challengers are Evil Ryu and Violent Ken. Evil Ryu mixes Ryu's toolkit with Akuma's super and dash moves, but as a result doesn't stand out as a particularly interesting character. Violent Ken plays a little simpler than Ken's Super Turbo iteration (who has a number of special kick moves), but gets a dash move similar to Akuma's Ashura Senku. This move can cover most of the screen quickly, making him feel immensely powerful compared to many of the other characters on the roster. However, compared to recent iterations of the Ryu archetype (such as Gouken or Oni) in other Street Fighter games, neither introduces new strategies – just more effective versions of setups we've seen before.

A few of the new control options offer more substantial alterations to the base game. Ultra makes it much easier to pull off just about any special move in the game, including supers, by letting you map any move to a single button. This doesn't work well for charge moves; if you haven't charged up a Sonic Boom, for example, pressing the assigned button forces Guile to move backwards until he has a charge, then fire it off. However, if you ever had trouble doing Yoga Teleports or Raging Demons, you can find your footing more easily this time around.

Training mode is also packed with many features from modern fighters. You can record and play back movements for training dummies to perform, and the input display shows the number of frames between inputs, making it easier to know if you need to perform a move faster or slower for it to combo. But though the visual overhaul is taken From Super Street Fighter II Turbo HD Remix, Ultra lacks several of that version's quality-of-life features, such as visible hitboxes, dip switch settings, and balance changes (Ryu doesn't have

a fake fireball, for example). The end result feels like a mix of forward and backwards steps, and it's a bummer Ultra doesn't always compare favorably to previous iterations.

Ultra also includes a couple of new modes, but they're not worth revisiting Street Fighter II on their own. Way of the Hado is an arcade-style, first-person minigame as boring as it is ill-conceived. You're supposed to perform Ryu's special moves by moving the Joy-Cons in specific motions, but I simply waved my wrists up and down most of the time, since I had no problems beating stages using only the Hadoukens my waving produced. You gain experience points to increase Ryu's damage, speed, and ability to build super meter – but the stronger I became, the lower my scores got. This is because the "combo" part of the score is based on how many hits you land without getting hit, and as fireballs deal more damage, you need fewer of them to down bad guys. Finishing the mode's three stages involved grinding out the second stage for about 20 minutes, then handily beating the final stage's boss, M.Bison. You can dive into an endless mode after that, but having more waves of enemies to kill doesn't make this mode any more fun.

Buddy Battle, a two-versus-one mode similar to Street Fighter Alpha's Dramatic Battle, is more fun than Way of the Hado, but still more of a gimmick than a long-term hook. Here you team up with a friend or computer-controlled ally to fight a single opponent, but must win two rounds before the enemy can win one. It offers a novel challenge as you figure out the best way to work with your

partner to mercilessly wallop your opponent back and forth, but it's much harder to coordinate with the A.I., making it essential to play with other people if you want to get the most out of it. The mode also runs you through the same five fights every time you play it, which makes it difficult to enjoy over time.

Ultra offers several other ways to play with friends. You can hand a Joy-Con off to a friend to play on the same console, use two Switches and copies of the game to play locally, or hop online. The online feature set includes standard, no-frills casual and ranked matches (ranking works as it does in Street Fighter IV, with individual player and character ranking points), two-player lobbies, the option to search for friends, and a standby feature that searches for online opponents as you work through the arcade mode. Most of my online matches played smoothly, with only a couple marred by significant lag. It's unfortunate the replay feature only saves offline battles, however, since analyzing past matches is one of the best ways to improve.

If playing Street Fighter II anywhere you go sounds like fun, Ultra Street Fighter II isn't a terrible version of it, and playing with friends brings back fond memories of when fighters were less intimidating. It may even kindle a newfound love for a game that has aged beautifully. But as a package, Ultra feels like the version of Street Fighter II we're stuck with for now (since it's otherwise not available on modern consoles), when it could have been the one we've been waiting for.

» **Suriel Vazquez**



Mario Kart 8 Deluxe

Improving on greatness

9.25



Style 1 to 4-Player Racing (8-Player Online) Publisher Nintendo Developer Nintendo Release April 28 Rating E

Switch

» Concept

Add new characters, a revamped battle mode, and the new capabilities of the Switch to Mario Kart 8's already great base

» Graphics

Whether playing in TV mode or handheld mode, online or local, the fast-paced action is smooth and crisp

» Sound

Listening to the catchy soundtrack while you race around the track never gets old

» Playability

Controlling Mario and his friends is easier than ever due to new accessibility options like smart steering and auto-accelerate

» Entertainment

With multiple new additions and important improvements, Mario Kart 8 Deluxe is the definitive version of one of the Wii U's best games

» Replay Value

High

Following *Breath of the Wild*, Nintendo's nascent system is lacking in must-play games two months into its lifecycle. Mario Kart 8 was a big hit for Wii U when it released in 2014, and now the acclaimed title makes the leap to Switch. While remastered games are rarely the most anticipated releases on any system, Mario Kart 8 Deluxe includes myriad important improvements and adds portability to create the definitive version of an already great game.

At its core, Deluxe is the same great title from Wii U. Racing up a wall is still disorienting fun, and taking the perfect shot with your green shell is satisfying as ever. Even with all the hours I poured into the original Wii U release, I still love the thrill of coming from behind in the final lap to win the race. Of course, some of that is thanks to the questionable rubber-band A.I. that has always been a sticking point of the series, but fans accepted that pitfall as a series mainstay long ago.

In addition to the core game, Mario Kart 8 Deluxe includes all of the downloadable content released for the Wii U version. This means you can tackle the Animal Crossing track as Link on the Master Cycle, or unlock Mercedes-Benz kart components for Dry Bowser and race on the simple-but-awesome Excitebike course. With 48 race tracks, 8 battle arenas, 5 difficulty settings (including mirror and the furious 200cc), and 42 characters to choose from, Mario Kart 8 Deluxe is a behemoth package.

Not all of the content is familiar. All-new characters like the Inklings from *Splatoon*, Dry Bones, and Bowser Jr.

join the pool of playable racers. Players can also hold two items now (like in *Double Dash*), adding an extra layer of strategy. However, the biggest addition to Mario Kart 8 Deluxe is the complete overhaul of battle mode.

In the original release of Mario Kart 8, battle mode was the major sore spot, since it made players duke it out on race tracks rather than dedicated battle arenas. With Deluxe, Nintendo has more than remedied that problem. In addition to adding new and reimagined classic battle arenas, Deluxe expands on the basic battle concept. The classic Balloon Battle, where you try and pop the balloons of other players while protecting your own, is joined by the all-new Renegade Roundup, as well as modes from past games like Bob-omb Blast, Coin Runners, and Shine Thief.

Renegade Roundup is a cops-and-robbers mode where one team tries to capture runaways before the time limit. Shine Thief is a free-for-all first where players try to possess a Shine Sprite for a set time while every other player tries to jar it loose and steal it. Coin Runners provides a fun mad-dash for gold coins. The action is fast-paced and surprisingly tense in these modes, but my favorite variant battle mode is Bob-omb Blast, a chaotic take on Balloon Battle where every item is replaced with explosive Bob-ombs. With customizable rule-sets and several exciting takes on the mainstay mode, this is the battle mode fans craved.

To round out the new features, Nintendo included a couple of new accessibility options that make it easier for anyone to jump into a race.

Options like smart-steer, which helps less experienced players stay on the track, and auto-accelerate, which is helpful for those unable to hold a button down for an extended period of time, combine with the optional motion controls to make this easily the most approachable entry in the franchise.

Adding to the accessibility is what the Switch brings to the table. This is a beautiful game full of vibrant colors, fast-paced action, and gorgeous visuals. Being able to not only play it on the go, but also experience no loss of performance in the process is fantastic. I loved taking it with me as I sat in a waiting room for an appointment, then sliding it back into the dock to continue my Grand Prix run on the big screen.

Multiplayer is a major part of the Mario Kart experience, and Deluxe makes it easier than ever to jump in with friends or matchmaking. I played both online and local multiplayer through wireless with no noticeable latency or framerate drops. Dumping four players onto a single Switch for splitscreen action also keeps the framerate smooth, and it's great to simply hand off individual Joy-Con controllers and get into a race or battle.

Mario Kart 8 Deluxe is primarily a re-release of an acclaimed game from three years ago, but by adding new content and addressing the biggest complaint of the original, this version is unquestionably the best way to experience Nintendo's great racer. Battle mode is back to its original glory, and when combined with the rest of the robust Mario Kart 8 package, it creates a great addition to the fledgling Switch library. » **Brian Shea**



The Splatoon Inklings join in on the fun for this version of Mario Kart 8



The revamped battle mode rights the biggest wrong of the original Mario Kart 8 release



Fire Emblem Echoes: Shadows Of Valentia

Welcome to the grindhouse

Style 1-Player Strategy/Role-Playing **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Intelligent Systems **Release** May 19 **Rating** T

7

Extreme difficulty and well-developed characters have always been Fire Emblem's bedrock. The series has evolved a fair amount since its inception, eventually allowing players to play matchmaker with their characters and even let them produce children to join the battle. You won't find these advances in Fire Emblem Echoes: Shadows of Valentia. This installment is a remake of an earlier entry, so don't come into this one expecting it to feel like a step forward for Fire Emblem—but you can still have fun if you're willing to put up with some frustrations.

Instead of a blank slate character, Echoes has the player take on the roles of Alm and Celica. The two children soon find themselves caught up in a war between two gods, Mila and Duma. The story shifts back and forth between adult Alm and Celica's perspectives as they separately travel across the fantastical continent of Valentia to bring the war to an end, with you recruiting characters into each protagonist's party and managing them.

Echoes changes a number of things that players who jumped on the series with the recent *Awakening* or *Fates* might find strange. Alongside the tried-and-true battle system, Echoes incorporates dungeon crawling and other tweaks. For example, in both *Awakening* and *Fates*, you changed a unit's class by using an item called a Second Seal that could be earned in battle or eventually purchased from merchants. In Echoes, you have to locate a shrine in various dungeons strewn across Valentia, which makes character class changes more of a journey that you have to undertake (with its own share of dangers) instead of a couple of buttons you press. While this might sound taxing, I actually found it to be a rather engaging

experience that made units' evolutions feel appropriately epic.

Echoes' quirks result in a Fire Emblem that's more challenging than any of the previous entries but also more frustrating and tedious as well. The chief problem is that the only way to victory is through grinding. While Echoes still uses the strategy battle system of the last few Fire Emblems, major story battles involve almost no strategy. If you're going up against enemies who are twice as powerful as you, you can rarely do anything about it except back out of the battle and go grind your characters in dungeons until they are strong enough to beat foes in a couple of hits.

Another major hurdle is how small your army is. While the other entries have provided you with a vast amount of characters to either get to know or use as fodder in battle, the number of units in Echoes is tiny in comparison. Since you're jumping from Alm and Celica's perspectives, you're also splitting your forces in half, meaning that each hero only has a handful of party members available. If you're playing on Classic Mode, where units perish for good if they're lost in battle, your campaign can become unwinnable due to a bad decision-making and poor saving.

Fire Emblem fans expect difficult battles, but Echoes' challenges are uninspired and grueling. A number of these battles come down to luck, with a victory or a loss being decided by a single arrow, and that's frustrating when a loss can mean a character you've spent hours building up is gone forever. You have a device that lets you go back as far as you want in battle, but it can only be used seven times in a dungeon before it needs to be recharged and it can't bring your main characters back, so it's more of a balm than a savior.

In spite of this tediousness and ridiculous challenge, I pushed through Echoes' time-warped frustrations because I was interested in Alm and Celica's story, as well as some of the characters in my party. I didn't find any of them quite as endearing as the cast of previous 3DS Fire Emblem games, but characters like the pirate-killer Saber and troubled turncoat Clive have their moments to shine. I was disappointed that I couldn't bring any of my characters together romantically, but not as disappointed as I thought I would be because of how strong the overarching plot is and how well-written the interactions between my party members were.

To call Fire Emblem Echoes a step back for the series would probably be unfair. As a remake it works on a number of levels, showing off the series' strange roots while also serving up an entertaining 30-hour epic fantasy. However, the brutal and dull difficulty and large amounts of necessary grinding left me feeling as frustrated as I was invested in Echoes' offerings. » **Javy Gwaltney**

3DS

» Concept

Save the continent of Valentia as warrior Alm and priestess Celica in this quirky take on Fire Emblem

» Graphics

Character models are a bit fuzzy, but battle effects and illustrated cutscenes are gorgeous

» Sound

A strong orchestral score runs throughout the campaign

» Playability

Echoes has a number of systems it doesn't explain well. They're eventually satisfying, but trial and error is required to master them

» Entertainment

Provides the challenge hardcore players seek, but the experience comes with its fair share of frustrations

» Replay Value

Moderately low



7.5 The Silver Case

Platform PS4, PC **Release** April 18 **Rating** M

I have a hard time putting together what exactly happened in The Silver Case, but it's a testament to the writing, characters, and mood that I want to figure it out. Portions are often slow, dense, and overbearing. However, the relatable character moments, intriguing short stories, and strong visual style eventually won me over. — Suriel Vazquez

6.5 Late Shift

Platform PS4, PC, iOS **Release** April 18 **Rating** M

As a movie, Late Shift is an enjoyable time. The acting is good, the script is well-written, the cinematography is serviceable and occasionally great, which all results in a competent genre film. However, Late Shift's rigid structure makes it less appealing as a game. — Javy Gwaltney



7.5 Cosmic Star Heroine

Platform PS4, PC **Release** April 11 **Rating** T

Cosmic Star Heroine takes inspiration from some of the best RPGs of yesteryear, such as Chrono Trigger, Phantasy Star, and Suikoden. This combination is tantalizing to any RPG fan who loves to wax nostalgic about the genre's early days. — Kimberley Wallace

7.75 Gnog

Platform PSVR, PS4 **Release** May 2 **Rating** E10+

Gnog is a simple puzzle game that never pushes the player too hard. Opening each box to rotate its wheels, push its buttons, and solve its puzzles is relaxing. Its charm surprised me and made me eager to pursue each new box as I unlocked them. — Kyle Hilliard

8.5 Bye-Bye Boxboy

Platform 3DS **Release** April 12 **Rating** E

I would absolutely play another Boxboy if it continues to experiment with abilities like it has here. But if Bye-Bye Boxboy does mark an end for HAL's quirky puzzle series, then it ends on a high note. — Kyle Hilliard

7 Danger Zone

Platform PS4, PC **Release** May 30 **Rating** E10+

I reveled in the bull-in-a-china-shop ethos of Three Fields Entertainments' last game Dangerous Golf, but while Danger Zone undoubtedly sets the world ablaze it also requires thinking along different lines. Danger Zone's more open levels and moving traffic creates situations requiring a more calculating kind of destruction. — Matthew Kato

5 Syberia 3

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC, Mac
Release April 25 **Rating** T

The Syberia series is a product of its time, and Syberia 3 doesn't bring back any excitement. It is plagued by bugs, a disappointing storyline, cliché characters, and puzzles that are more frustrating than fun. This return fails to do the series justice, feeling more like an unpolished and dated adventure game instead of a revival. — Elise Favis

7 Deformers

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC
Release April 18 **Rating** E10+

Though it may not have the staying power to tussle with stronger multiplayer offerings, at the core of Deformers is a strong multiplayer experience with a great mix of simple basics and potential for the once-in-a-blue-moon moments that define multiplayer games. — Suriel Vazquez

6.5 Rick And Morty: Virtual Rick-ality

Platform Rift, Vive **Release** April 20 **Rating** M

This game achieves its modest ambitions of letting fans to dive head-first into the Rick and Morty universe. While I enjoy the faithfulness to the subject matter, Virtual Rick-ality doesn't have the depth or variety to make it successful on other levels. — Joe Juba

8.5 Cities: Skylines – Xbox One Edition

Platform Xbox One **Release** April 21 **Rating** E

The mayoral-planning fantasy is still intact with this version, and now easier than ever to get into. If you're an Xbox One owner who is a fan of city-building simulation games, you need to check out Cities: Skylines. – Brian Shea

8 Full Throttle Remastered

Platform PS4, PC **Release** April 18 **Rating** T

The quirks of the original game are as attractive today as they were then, and this version does a fine job smoothing out the rough edges, making Full Throttle Remastered a road trip worth taking. – Javy Gwaltney

7 NBA Playgrounds

Platform PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC **Release** May 9 **Rating** E

The colorful, big-head art style and over-the-top hardwood action both feel familiar, as if the series has been with us all along. That perception has a lot to do with how liberally it borrows from its predecessors, primarily NBA Jam and NBA Street. – Matt Bertz

6.5 The Fidelio Incident

Platform PC **Release** May 23 **Rating** NR

The bulk of the story in this first-person adventure is confined to scattered diary entries, but the tasks players complete between reading them are unrelated and uninteresting. – Joe Juba



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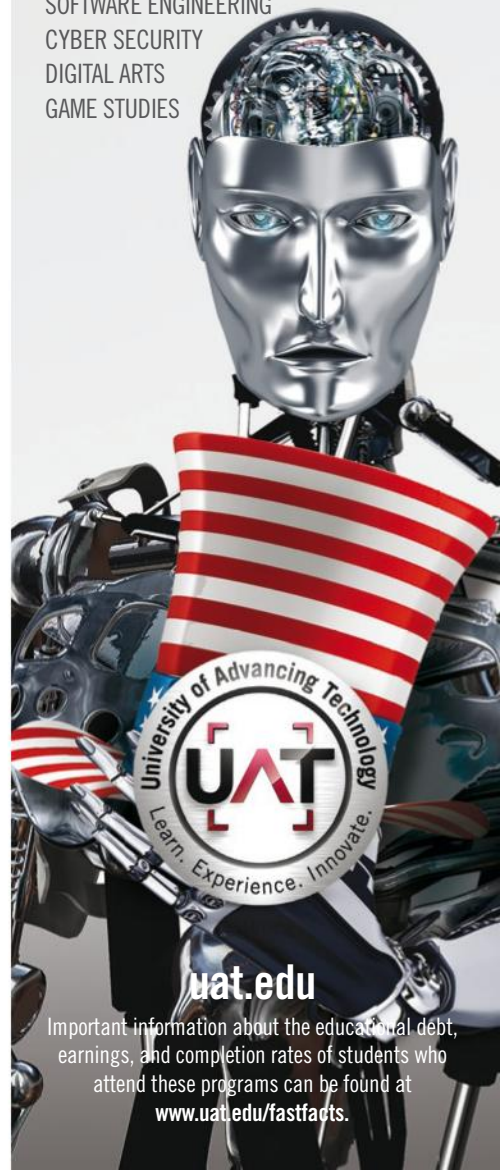
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The Saturn Spiral



How a series of bad decisions led to one of Sega's biggest failures



A

n exciting blue mascot, a stable of unrivaled licensed sports titles, and an edgy marketing campaign drove Sega from relative obscurity to challenge Nintendo for console supremacy in the early '90s. The Genesis went toe-to-toe with SNES to make Sega a household name.

With Sony's first console looming and the Nintendo 64 just over a year away, the encore nearly five years later proved much more difficult. Following Genesis, fans had lofty expectations for Sega's Saturn to continue the company's momentum.

With a swell of hype elevating Sony's PlayStation, Sega wanted to introduce its console to fans with a bang, but ended up with a whimper due to a surprise North American launch at E3. **by Brian Shea**

STARTING ON THE WRONG FOOT

While gamers praised Genesis for its graphics and sound, cartridges were being phased out in favor of optical discs. Sega broke ground on optical disc development with its Sega CD add-on for the Genesis, but the Saturn was the first standalone Sega console to rely on the medium. Optical discs brought enhanced polygonal rendering, better sound, and advanced 3D graphics that veered much closer to what was available in arcades at the time.

The Saturn hit Japanese stores in late 1994, and all 200,000 units sold out immediately upon release. Fans and critics alike praised the strong *Virtua Fighter* port. Sega felt confident in the Saturn's early Japanese performance, but that success didn't translate to North America.

When president and CEO of Sega of America Tom Kalinske took the E3 press conference stage in May of 1995, he knew he was about to make the wrong move. Kalinske was not only tasked with introducing the Saturn, but also shocking the world with the announcement of its immediate availability. Originally scheduled to launch in September, the Japanese executives pushed the launch forward to beat Sony to market. Kalinske, who played a large role in making Sega so competitive with Nintendo in the first place, vehemently disagreed with the decision.

"When we were going to launch it in the fall, I thought that was too early; I wanted to put it off until the following year," he says. "This was one of the main reasons I left Sega."

Sega chairman and CEO Hayao Nakayama looked past Kalinske's objections to launch the system right from that E3 stage. "Nakayama was so concerned over Sony launching a hardware platform that he wanted to beat them to the punch," Kalinske says.

Sony responded during its own keynote at that same E3. Sony Interactive Entertainment CEO Olaf Olafsson brought head of PlayStation development Steve Race on stage for a "brief presentation." Race simply said "\$299." This price point undercut the Saturn by \$100, and Race walked off the stage to cheers.

THE FALLOUT

The Saturn's surprise launch confused consumers, but that was just the start of Sega's problems. Saturn was only available at select retailers at launch; those left in the dark responded by dropping support for Sega products. This betrayed Sega's tireless efforts to win over retailers in the prior generation after Nintendo tried to keep competitors out of the market.

This rush to launch also affected consumers, who had a difficult time finding a store with units in stock. Kalinske could see the writing on the wall. "Everybody knows that you have to have an adequate amount of software and enough games on the hardware platform in order to make it successful," he says. "We didn't have it. I could see this was going to be a failure."

The most obvious hole in the Saturn's software lineup was Sega's mascot, Sonic the Hedgehog. A 3D Sonic title called *Sonic X-treme* was in development by STI while the core Sonic Team worked on *Nights into Dreams*, but multiple snags led to its cancelation. The Saturn was the only standalone Sega platform to not feature a unique mainline Sonic title. "Clearly, it would have helped so much to have a great Sonic game on the Saturn launch," Kalinske says. "It would have made all the difference in the world."

Instead, Saturn launched with a small, but respectable lineup. With games like *Daytona U.S.A.*, *Virtua Fighter*, and *Panzer Dragoon*, the launch lineup was not without its hits. However, following that window Sega was hard-pressed to find many blockbusters, and fan interest evaporated once the PlayStation launched in September with the promise of overwhelming third-party support.



Sega tried to maintain the alternative, edgy attitude of the Genesis through its marketing for the Saturn, but the novelty didn't work this time



The Collaborations That Never Were

Before the creation of Saturn, Sega explored the idea of a joint-hardware platform. Sega of America's head of R&D Joe Miller was unimpressed with the initial hardware specs of the proposed console, and he liked the idea of sharing the costs on the creation of the hardware since platform holders typically lose money on hardware.

Sega of America worked with Sony on specs for a potential joint platform. The team pitched the idea to Sony of Japan president Nobuyuki Idei, who agreed that it made good business sense. Unfortunately, Sega of Japan didn't believe that Sony was serious about creating hardware, so the discussions fell apart and the two companies went separate routes.

Around that time, Sega executives also met with Silicon Graphics founder Jim Clark, who pitched a new chipset the company thought would be great for gaming. Miller and Sega of America CEO Tom Kalinske were impressed by the chipset, but Sega of Japan hardware guru Hideki Sato said the chip was too big and wasted too much silicon. After being turned down by Sega, Silicon Graphics formed a partnership with Nintendo for the N64.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

In 1996, Kalinske walked away from Sega, with former Atari and Sony executive Bernie Stolar taking his place. Two years later, the Saturn was discontinued after selling just over 9 million units worldwide, a number dwarfed by its competition. The N64 has sold nearly 33 million units worldwide, while the PlayStation reached more than 100 million units sold.

The Saturn's failure began a downward spiral that continued with 1999's Dreamcast. Though viewed as a strong platform by many, the Dreamcast sold fewer units than the Saturn worldwide,

and was the final console Sega released.

Following yet another failed console, Sega ceased hardware production altogether and became a third-party software developer. Despite the Dreamcast ultimately burying the console division of Sega, Saturn was a portent to Sega's troubled future and served as the beginning of the downfall. It's impossible to tell what the video game landscape would look like today had the Saturn stood shoulder-to-shoulder with PlayStation or even Nintendo 64, but a series of poor decisions squandered any hope of us ever seeing that future. ♦

Spreading The Assassin's Creed

The wheres and whens of the history-spanning series

One of the big draws of Assassin's Creed has always been the way its fiction weaves in and out of the real events and locations of world history, lending an air of conspiracy and secrecy to situations you thought you knew. As Ubisoft prepares to leap back to the origin of the Assassin order (see our cover story on p. 36), we charted the major locations and periods where the series has taken us so far.

We've included most of the games, comics, and films that

feature distinct historical periods and locations, while some other aspects of the mythology that retell key elements from new perspectives (like the novels and certain mobile games), have been left out. Most dates are approximate, and projects are listed chronologically as they unfolded in history, not by date of project release. Where a project deals with multiple time periods or locations, we've listed the central focus of the action. **by Matt Miller**



1. Assassin's Creed Origins

(game)
Egypt, ~ 50 B.C.

2. Assassin's Creed

(game)
Israel/Syria, 1191

3. Assassin's Creed: Bloodlines

(game)
Cyprus, 1191

4. Assassin's Creed: Lineage

(film)
Italy, 1476

5. Assassin's Creed II

(game)
Italy, 1488

6. Assassin's Creed

(film)
Granada, Spain, ~ 1492

7. Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood

(game)
Rome, Italy, ~ 1500

8. Assassin's Creed: Revelations

(game)
Constantinople (Istanbul, Turkey), ~ 1511

9. Assassin's Creed: Embers

(film)
Tuscany, Italy, 1524

10. Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China

(game)
China, 1526

11. Assassin's Creed: Setting Sun

(comic)
Peru, 1536

12. Assassin's Creed: Trial by Fire

(comic)
Salem, Massachusetts, 1692

13. Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag

(game)
Caribbean, ~ 1715

14. Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry

(game expansion)
Haiti, ~ 1730s

15. Assassin's Creed Rogue

(game)
New York/North Atlantic, ~ 1750s

16. Assassin's Creed Liberation

(game)
New Orleans, Louisiana, ~ 1760s

17. Assassin's Creed III

(game)
New England, ~ 1770s

18. Assassin's Creed Unity

(game)
Paris, ~ 1790s

19. Assassin's Creed: Brahman

(comic)
India, 1839

20. Assassin's Creed Chronicles: India

(game)
India, 1841

21. Assassin's Creed Syndicate

(game)
London, 1868

22. Assassin's Creed: The Fall

(comic)
Russia, 1917

23. Assassin's Creed Chronicles: Russia

(game)
Russia, 1918

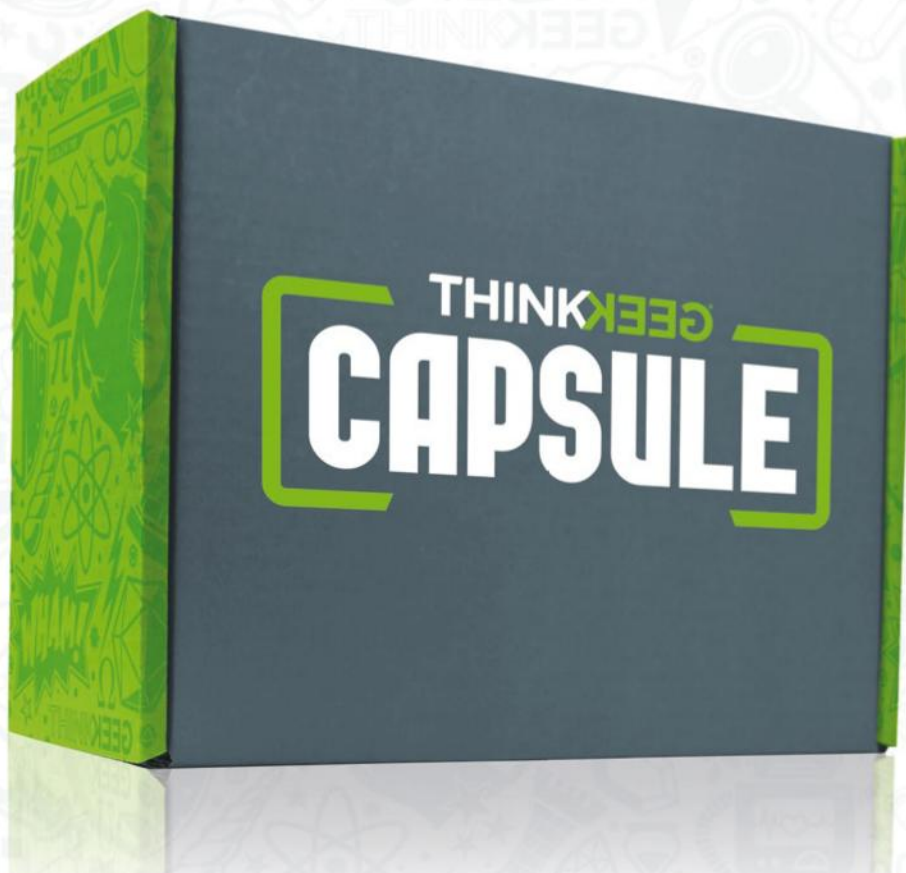
24. Assassin's Creed: The Chain

(comic)
Connecticut, 1926



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